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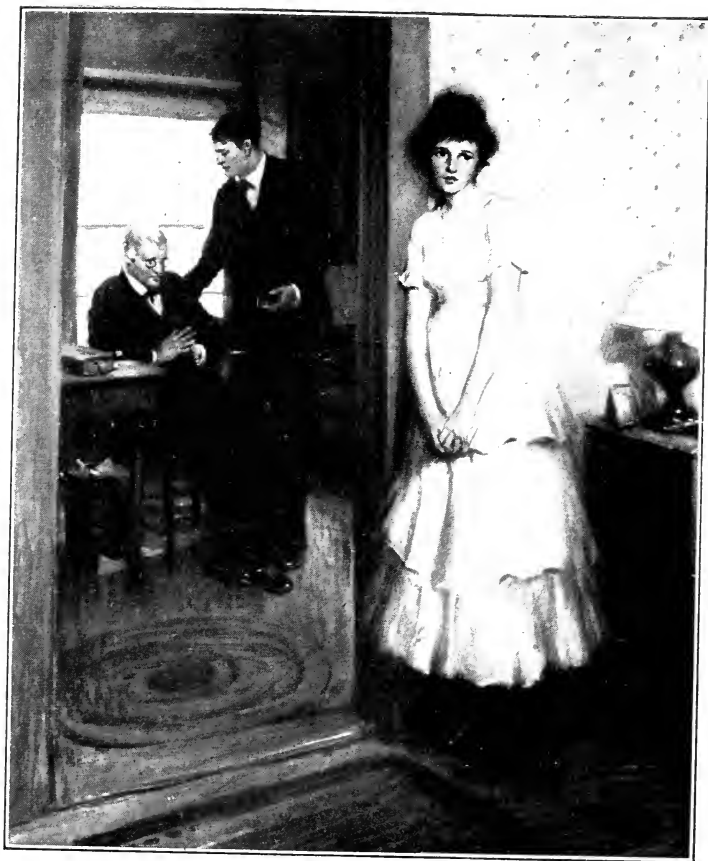
THE PROMISES
OF ALICE

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BOOKS BY
MARGARET DELAND

THE PROMISES OF ALICE
THE AWAKENING OF HELENA RICHIE
THE RISING TIDE
AROUND OLD CHESTER
THE HANDS OF ESAU
OLD CHESTER TALES
AN ENCORE
DR. LAVENDAR'S PEOPLE
GOOD FOR THE SOUL
PARTNERS
R. J.'S MOTHER 8vo
THE COMMON WAY
THE IRON WOMAN
THE VOICE
THE WAY TO PEACE
WHERE THE LABORERS ARE FEW

HARPER & BROTHERS, NEW YORK
ESTABLISHED 1817



But he thought it would be right for her to be true to her promise to Neely.

17-24

The
PROMISES OF ALICE

*The Romance
of a New England Parsonage*

By *hm*

MARGARET DELAND

Author of

"The Iron Woman" "The Awakening of Helena Richie" etc.

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With Illustrations by
HAROLD BRETT



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THE PROMISES OF ALICE

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G-T

YASUJI UCHIDA
HIT NO
GUTTEN ROY NO

TO
LORIN

THIS
THE BOOK HE HELPED ME WRITE,
IN OUR LAST WINTER TOGETHER

MAY 2ND, 1917

ILLUSTRATIONS

- But he thought it would be right for her to be true to her promise to Neely *Frontispiece*
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THE PROMISES
OF ALICE

THE PROMISES OF ALICE

CHAPTER I

THE village of West Meadows climbed the sunny flank of one of Vermont's green mountains. At the head of Main Street, looking out over the valley, was the meeting-house; there was an old graveyard behind it, and in front two wineglass elms, whose lacy shadows swung back and forth across the white columns of the porch. Next to the church was the parsonage, grayed by the weather of nearly a hundred years, and with a thatch of Virginia creeper—rustling green in the summer, crimson in the autumn—spreading half-way across its mossy old roof.

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William Alden had been called to the West Meadows church just as he completed his course in the theological school. The very day the "call" came, he proposed—seeing his future assured—to a pretty cousin, Mary Alden, who, to his astonishment, refused him emphatically. She said she wasn't good enough to be a minister's wife, and she didn't like the idea, anyhow. "I want to be free to talk in my own way. If I should say 'darn it' all the old maids in your church would hold up their hands! No, William; I'm fond of you, but I won't marry a parson!"

That was in the late 'seventies, when "darn it" really was shocking. So William, who was perhaps not very wildly in love—he was never "wildly" anything!—admitted to himself that she was probably wise in saying that she wasn't fitted to be a minister's wife. "I won't urge her. I won't interfere with what she thinks is right," he thought, sadly; and submitted without further protest, except to say—as probably every other rejected lover in the world

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has said,—that he was “done with all women!”

A month later he made an exception in favor of one woman—a saintly girl who never dreamed of saying “darn it,” and who was solemnly willing to be a parson’s wife. So again he fell into rather placid love.

He married his austerely good and lovely Ellen, and brought her to his first charge, which, as things turned out, was his last, too! For the parsonage was comfortable, and his study large and sunny, and the church donated a horse and buggy, and Mrs. Alden was such a wonderful young housekeeper that she made both ends of his small salary meet—so why shouldn’t he have ended his days there? At any rate, he did.

Yet a country parish was not what his Ellen expected when his heart, caught on the rebound, fell into her small, cool hands. Then she hoped that West Meadows was only a first step to a far more important work in saving souls; she told him so, in

the early days of their marriage, very often.

“We will go to China as missionaries, William!” she used to say; and the exalted look in her clear, unhumorous eyes made him so humble that he was ashamed to say how much he liked West Meadows, and his sunny study, and his big, rangy Kentucky horse, and the friendly people who were so patient with his easy-going ways and his constitutional inability to denounce people who did not agree with him on points of doctrine. He was ashamed to confess to his wife that he didn’t like to leave what she called the “fleshpots.” But he was still more ashamed of another feeling, which he would not confess, even to himself:

“I don’t like to interfere with other people’s religions.”

Of course this was no sentiment for a clergyman to entertain! So, when Mrs. Alden talked of missionary work he agreed, hastily:

“Yes; sometime we’ll go to China.”

But as the months, and then the years,

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passed, Ellen Alden stopped speaking of the conversion of China. Her passionately devout mind could not understand his mild tolerance of "other people's religions." He seemed to her just lazily indifferent and given up to comfort. So her spiritual ambition for him died.

How does a woman feel when her husband lets slip some high endeavor she has expected of him? But we need not go into that, because this story is not about Mrs. Alden. It is about her one child, Alice, born after six years of married life. During those years, that thwarted ambition about China must have deepened and deepened, for when, at last, Alice came, it saw its chance and leaped into fulfilment:

The baby should be a missionary!

She did not wait, as Hannah did with "little Samuel," until "the child was weaned, and she might go, with the ephah of flour, the bullocks, and the bottle of wine, to the house of the Lord in Shiloh." When Alice was scarcely an hour old, and they laid the tiny bundle, with its glimpse

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of puckered red face, in her shaking arms, she lifted the baby and gasped out: "For this child I prayed . . . and the Lord hath given me . . . my petition; therefore I lend her to . . . the Lord. As long as she . . . liveth, she shall be lent to . . . the Lord."

Her husband, leaning over her, agonized still because of the long night of birth, was ready enough to echo the vow, just as a thank offering that the mother had been spared.

Exactly how the child was to be lent to the Lord seemed, in those first days, a detail. But as Mrs. Alden got well, and the small red face grew pink, and the puckers smoothed into lovely baby flesh, she told him what that dedication meant. At which he winced a little. "*I failed her,*" he said to himself; but aloud he only said, drolly, that he should call the child Samuel.

As Alice grew up into a leggy and speechless little girl his wife would remind him, gently: "Alice is to be a missionary, William."

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And he always said: "Oh yes. Yes, indeed!"

Then he would quiz his silent Alice: "Won't it do, Sam, if I wear a pigtail and let you preach at me?"

But it was all so far away that time when "Samuel" should make up for her father's failure and preach to the wearers of pig-tails, that William Alden took her proposed career rather lightly. "If she wants to be a missionary, *I* won't interfere!" he used to say to himself. And, prompted by his wife, he was careful, at family worship, to pray for Alice's sanctification for her high calling.

So this was how it came about that, as far back as the conscientious, uncommunicative little girl could remember, her future was clear before her. Her mother whispered it into her baby ears; her father mentioned it at family prayers; the congregation of the West Meadows church gave her as Christmas presents appropriate, and rather terrifying books of missionary memoirs; Cousin Mary Alden, who generally spent

her summers with them, said Alice must be sure to send her a box of tea when she got over to China; and Neely Henderson, who lived on the other side of the meeting-house, used "being a missionary" as a plot for the games he and she played among the slate headstones in the burying-ground. Alice was always the heroine of these games. She was tortured by African tribes, buried alive by Patagonians, sliced into one-inch pieces by the Chinese.

More than once the Henderson or Alden family had had to come to her rescue—as when, one September day, Neely felt it necessary to tie her to a stake, and light—he said—"just a teeny weeny fire." Mr. Alden caught him red-handed—Alice roped to one of the elms in front of the meeting-house, and Neely heaping brush about her knees! Of course the youngster learned the weight of the ministerial hand—which moved Alice not only to tears, but to what was, for her, quite a long speech:

"Neely wouldn't 'a' let me get burned *entirely* up. We were playing martyrs. I

wanted to know if I could be a martyr. I won't have Neely hit!" she sobbed.

But Mr. Alden only said to the bewildered boy: "Be off with you! Don't let me hear of any more such doings!" Then he took his little girl's hand and said, under his breath, "I'd like to see some old-fashioned naughtiness in you, Samuel!" Opening his own front door, he paused on the threshold and called, loudly, "Ellen!"—he was one of those men who always call their wife's name the minute they enter the house—"Ellen!"

"Yes, William," came the calm voice.

"Look here! Don't let Sam play with that Henderson boy. He has too much imagination. Good heavens! If I hadn't come up at that minute—"

"What were you playing, Alice?" Mrs. Alden asked, coming out into the hall to hang up her husband's coat and take off Sam's rubbers.

"Missionaries," Alice said, faintly.

"I'm afraid you don't get your taste in games from your daddy, Alice," William Alden said, ruefully; and then, a little im-

patiently, "Why doesn't she play Indians or pirates, Ellen, as Mary and I did when we were children?"

As between missionaries and pirates, Mrs. Alden had no preference; she only took her little girl in her arms and whispered that for as long as she lived she was "lent to the Lord," to do His work in saving souls.

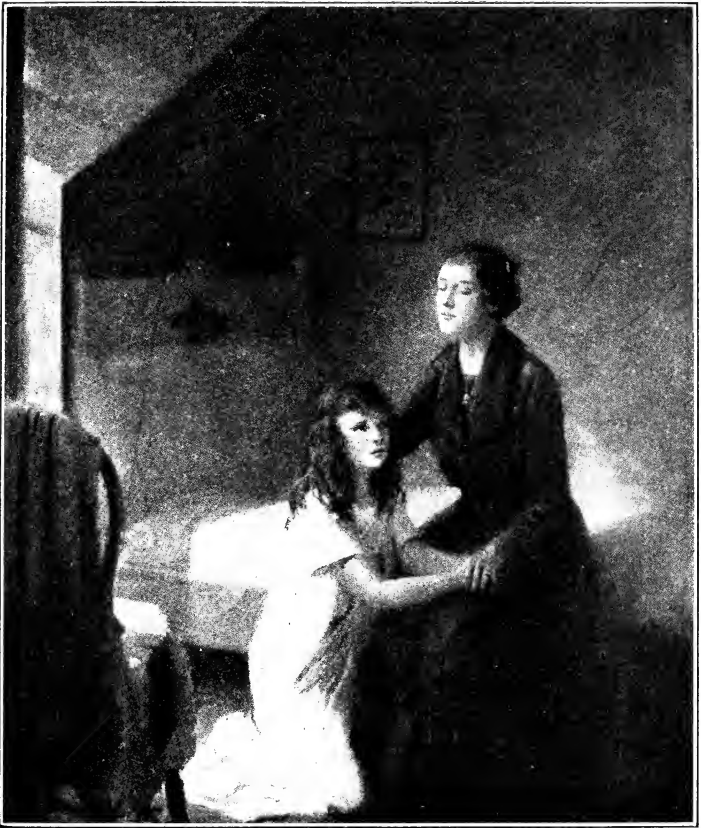
"Yes, ma'am," said Alice, her lip shaking. "But—I'm afraid I won't—won't like being a missionary—very much?"

It was the first time that the bottled-up nature had spoken out; but Mrs. Alden, in her passion of consecration, heard nothing in the words but the fancies of a child.

"Well, don't play martyrs, dear. You might have been burned!" she said.

"I wanted to know whether I *could* be," Alice insisted, in a low voice. She was still trying, painfully, to open her gentle, literal soul to her mother. "Missionaries are pretty often martyrs," she said. "I—I just wondered if I—" Her voice trailed into silence.

Mrs. Alden's soul was literal, too, so even her heavenly remoteness was stirred by the



She repeated, in a small, trembling voice, word for word as her mother spoke it, a "Fovv."

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child's danger: "Indeed you could have been burned—in that cotton frock!"

However, there were no more missionary games as trials of Alice's endurance. Very shortly after the attempted *auto-da-fé* the Hendersons left West Meadows, and, deprived of Neely's imagination, Alice's ideas about her career were fed only on missionary reports—stories of splendid heroism and enthusiasm, which kept the flame of purpose burning in her little conscience. But under the flame there was a shiver, for once or twice she had come upon stories of endurance of suffering, pictured so vividly that they had left scars of terror on her mind.

In spite of the scars, one night, when she was about fifteen, she knelt by her mother in the moonlit darkness of her bedroom, and repeated, in a small, trembling voice, word for word as her mother spoke it, a "vow" that she would "give her life to the saving of souls."

When Cousin Mary heard of this she looked a little doubtful. "Isn't she rather young to make vows?"

“Not vows to the Lord,” said Mrs. Alden.

Mr. Alden frowned in a vaguely troubled way. “I am inclined to agree with Mary,” he said; “but of course you must do what you think is right, Ellen.” He was so incapable of objecting to anything anybody thought “right,” that this was his only protest. So the “vow” stood.

And on the whole, as he had failed his wife, he was glad that Alice was going to give her what she wanted—“some time.” The time was so indefinitely far off that he very rarely thought of it. What he did think was that if he lived to be as old as Methuse-lah he would never be as good as Ellen! Once he even admitted to himself that he *almost* wished she was made of common clay, like himself, or Mary!

“I can imagine that Satan would be very uncomfortable in heaven,” he said to Miss Alden; and they both laughed, but Mrs. Alden looked gently blank and grieved. Afterward, the two sinners reproached themselves for their flippancy; flippancy was almost profane in Ellen’s

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serene presence, so fixed were her mind and soul on that heaven in which Satan would have been "uncomfortable."

As for Alice, her vow steadied her. There is a certain relief in being committed to a thing, even if you don't like it. She used to say to herself that she was one who, swearing to her own hurt, could not change. She never said so to any one else; consequently—as is always the case when the lips of the heart are dumb—she suffered. As she grew older there were many nights when she lay awake staring into the darkness and saying under her breath, "Can I do it?" Sometimes her faith answered, triumphantly, "Yes!" But sometimes poor human nature shivered and said, "I made a vow; so I've *got* to!"

By the time she was seventeen her future was as inevitable to her as it was to her mother, and indeed to everybody in West Meadows. Even the occasional "Exchange" knew about it, and would congratulate her solemnly upon her consecration.

"The fields are white with the harvest, my dear child," one of these good men re-

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marked; "and the Lord will bless you in your undertaking. May He give you courage to endure, even unto the end—be it of hardships only, or the bitter pangs of martyrdom."

Alice, whitening silently, said, "Yes, sir;"—and crept away to her own room, almost sick at her stomach with fright. But she never said so. Instead, she listened to Mrs. Alden's anxiety as to just how she was to be trained for her work. For, after all, you can't convert the heathen—and nowadays you are not supposed to try to—unless you have a fairly sound education to start with. And education—above the public-school type—means money. Mrs. Alden had been saving for this ever since she had "lent her child to the Lord"; but a country minister's wife can't save much.

It was then that Cousin Mary Alden came to the rescue. She had arrived for her usual summer in West Meadows, and, listening to Mrs. Alden's hopes and anxieties, and hearing Mr. Alden pray—when he remembered it—that "the child of this house

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may carry light into the dark places of the earth," her own savings began to burn a hole in her pocket. She and Alice's mother talked it all over. . . . She was told just what the desired education would cost, and of a fruitless effort to provide for it by an appeal to Mrs. Alden's bachelor brother in California, for money "to send Alice to China as a missionary."

The Californian's irreverent answer made Mary Alden laugh: "*If your girl will undertake to convert the Christian Chinese back to the faith of his fathers, I'll hold up both hands—and then put them in my pockets for her.*" Miss Alden had laughed, but the eyes of Alice's mother had filled with tears. And that was how it happened that Cousin Mary knew just how much money was needed, and how much—or, rather, how little—lay in the savings-bank; and what that little represented of self-denial and devotion.

Knowing all these things, when the time came for her to go back to her little house in Boston, she went into the Rev. William

Alden's study, which smelled of tobacco and leather bindings, and put a check into his hands.

"William," she said, "I never felt much call to do anything for the world but behave myself—as well as I knew how. And I never thought much about missions. But Ellen is such a saint I'd rather help her send Alice to China than go to Europe myself—which is what I've been saving up for, like the selfish wretch I am! I know Alice's heart is set on it, too. So I want you to take this thousand dollars and send her to some girls' college, where she can be properly educated."

There was a moment of stunned silence. For all he had called his daughter "Sam," and prayed dutifully that she might do the Lord's work, the idea of Alice's leaving home had never been a reality to Alice's father.

"But, Mary," he remonstrated, "so large a sum! You—you mustn't—" he stammered; then he went to the door of his study and called, sharply, "Ellen!"

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“Yes, William,” came the quiet answer.

“Come down-stairs! Mary needs looking after. She’s throwing checks around!”

Mrs. Alden came into the study, a little pale, but with shining eyes. “Yes,” she said; “I know what Mary is going to do.”

“But we must not accept—”

His wife laid a small, thin hand on his lips. “She is not giving the money to us, William; she isn’t even giving it to Alice. She is lending it to the Lord!” It seemed as if a torch was burning behind her eyes; her whole face was illuminated. “Oh,” she said, “This is the Lord’s doing; and it is marvelous in our eyes!” Her lips twitched with emotion. “You must tell Alice, William,” she said, brokenly; “I—I can’t.”

She turned swiftly, and they heard her run up-stairs and close and bolt the door of her own room. Her husband and Cousin Mary looked at each other.

“What old sinners we are, William, you and I!” said Mary Alden, in an awed voice.

“We couldn’t offer up the child like that!”

“I couldn’t,” he said, heavily;—“even

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though she wants to be offered up. But Ellen hasn't a thought of what Alice's going will mean to her. She's on her knees now, thanking God for her own loss. Oh yes, I'm a sinner, and I've always disappointed her; but Alice will make it up to her."

Still holding the generous check in his fingers, he walked over to the window and stared with unseeing eyes at a spray of Virginia creeper falling from the eaves and swaying back and forth in the soft wind; beyond was the church, gleaming white through the lacy foliage of the wineglass elms.

Alice was to go away!

For a moment he had a curious sense of being afraid of his wife; afraid of her single terrible passion—the saving of souls!—which had brought this thing about. He wished Mary had kept her money. But no; it would have happened, anyhow. Alice and Ellen were both entirely determined. Mary's kindness only made things easier for them. And, of course, if Alice was going to do this great thing—"it is a great thing,"

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he told himself, wretchedly—a sound education was necessary. “Ellen shall have her way,” he said, under his breath; “I won’t interfere.” Then he flung back to his cousin, over his shoulder, “Tell Sam yourself, Mary.”

Miss Alden felt a sudden misgiving. “But, William, *you* want her to be a missionary, don’t you?”

“Why, of course, of course!” he said, impatiently. He turned away from the window, and she saw that he was pale. “Even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t interfere with what Ellen and Alice feel is right. It has been the dream of Ellen’s life. I failed her, you know. The fleshpots of West Meadows, I suppose. . . . Yes; she has built everything on Sam’s devotion to the cause—and Sam, fortunately, will never fail her.”

Cousin Mary looked troubled. “I hope I haven’t been officious. I thought—”

“‘Officious’!” he said. “My dear girl, you are atoning for me! And Alice will be crazy with happiness. But—I wish she wouldn’t go so far away. I don’t know why

Ellen's eye has always been on China. For my part, I think there are darker places than China—and some of them are quite near home, too! As for taking light to the Chinese, they have a pretty fair tallow dip of their own."

Miss Alden was silent.

"You go and tell Sam of your great kindness to us, Mary," he said.

She nodded and left him, her uneasiness not quite banished. However, it disappeared in the joy of telling Alice. She saw the embryo missionary, coming over from the church where she had been practising the anthem for the next day, and, hailing her, they went back together and sat down on a lichen-covered tombstone which stood like a table under a blossoming locust-tree.

Alice's gray eyes, gazing vaguely down the sunny valley and over at the shadows drifting up Ascutney, suddenly dilated with attention:

"—'educated, so that I can be a missionary?'" she interrupted, breathlessly.

"Yes. And I am perfectly delighted to

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have a finger in the pie. But, Alice, promise me you won't think the white race is God's only child, and the yellow and black people are just stepchildren! He doesn't love us for our complexions! As I look at it, we all worship the same God, no matter what we call him. What is that poem?

'Father of all! in every age,
In every clime adored—
By saint, by savage, and by sage—
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord!'

I always liked that idea. Personally I don't think I'd enjoy being a missionary, except for the chance to see strange countries and to teach the people to use soap and water. I'd like *that!* And cleanliness would be as good for their souls as Bibles. Do teach them to be clean, Alice."

In her vision of all the scrubbing-brushes and soap and Bibles which—through Alice—her thousand dollars would incite the heathen to use, and the joy that the child's devotion would bring to Ellen, Miss Alden saw in Alice's blank amazement nothing but speechless gratitude.

CHAPTER II

WHEN they got back to the parsonage—Cousin Mary's head high with the satisfaction of having done a pretty big thing—Alice ran up to her own room and bolted the door. Then she stood still and breathed hard. It seemed as if something gripped her heart and squeezed it. She sat down, feeling a little faint. If only she could have cried out, "Please, I don't *want* to be a missionary!" But she had never been able to cry out. And besides, what difference would it make? She had vowed. . . . All she could do was to kneel down by her bed and say over and over, "O God, *please* make me want to go!"

But whether she should ever "want" to or not, the idea of not going never occurred to her.

In the next two years of college her future grew very definite, and everything she did

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was done with the view of training herself for it. In the long vacations at home she had her Bible class, and went to mothers' meetings, and organized "socials," and attended sewing societies. Such New England parish activities do not sound very Asiatic, but Alice meant to transplant them all to the land of the dragon. Every Sunday afternoon she hitched Jim—a rather elderly Jim now, but still big and rangy and friendly—into her father's old buggy and drove four miles out on Bald Head Road, to a small red school-house where she had a Sunday-school for the children of the loggers. She was sure the Chinese children would love to come to Sunday-school!

She was quite happy in all this, except when some admiring friend told her how "brave" she was to be a missionary. "I couldn't do it!" the West Meadows girls admitted; "Why, they say there was a missionary once in Africa, and they buried her alive in a white ants' nest!"

"They don't have white ants in China," Alice retorted, bravely; but she caught her

breath. Yet most of the time the old fear was asleep; perhaps because the time of going to China seemed pretty far off. When you are twenty, two years is a long time to look forward to. Even a year is a good while. And by and by six months is quite a respite—if what you are looking forward to is being hanged!

Toward the middle of that second year the interest of finding herself important did its part in keeping fear asleep; for she was very important in West Meadows! The deacons were openly proud of her and told her she was a courageous girl; the sewing society expended itself upon her outfit and sighed over the hardships she must encounter; the Sunday-school raised fifty dollars to buy certain necessary books—one of them contained the story of the ants' nest—and at Wednesday night prayer-meeting she was always prayed for.

In the midst of the little bustle of solemn excitement Mrs. Alden wrote to her California brother, gently exulting in the fact that, although he had not helped her,

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the Lord had! To which the Californian replied that if the Lord had ever lived in California—"which I sometimes doubt!"—He would think twice before sending an American girl to convert the Chinese!

"I wonder why he says that?" Alice pondered, with a shiver.

She was to sail in October. In August Cousin Mary closed her house in Boston and came up to West Meadows to help with preparations. Mrs. Alden whitened during those lessening weeks; as for Mr. Alden, he tried to avoid thinking how rapidly they were lessening! It was about this time that Alice read up one day on various Chinese tortures, and cried herself to sleep the same night.

Once William Alden, looking at his saintly Ellen with curious eyes, said: "I wish I wanted her to go as much as you do. Won't it just about kill you, Ellen?"

She smiled and said: "In a way, yes. But what difference does that make?"

"Well, it would make some difference to me," he said, meekly.

But she did not hear him; she was sew-

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ing as steadily as a machine. Every stitch was a dedication of Alice, mind and body, to the saving of souls! By September she had stitched herself into a little wraith of energy and purpose. Alice sewed, too, and so did Cousin Mary. Mr. Alden just wandered about among trunks and boxes, making jokes and futile suggestions. And in the midst of it appeared—of all people!—Neely Henderson.

Neely Henderson had come to West Meadows to investigate some distinctly promising workings for a marble-quarry, back somewhere among a few unsold acres still belonging to the Hendersons. He saw Alice at the post-office and went up and spoke to her.

“I’m Neely Henderson,” he said. “I suppose you’ve forgotten me? We played missionaries, and I tried to make a martyr of you.”

“Of course I remember you!” she said.

“And the ‘stake’ and the ‘fagots’? It makes my blood run cold to think of my craziness. You had on a cotton dress!”

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He had taken possession of her mail—mostly missionary publications—and stopped to unhitch Jim for her. Alice climbed into the buggy, and, gathering up the reins, looked down at him. “Good-by,” she said.

“Mayn’t I come home with you?”

“I am going to drive out to the red school-house, to tidy it for to-morrow,” she said, shyly—back in the early ’nineties girls were still shy. “I have a Sunday-school class there in the afternoon.”

“Mayn’t I come, too?”

She said yes, if he didn’t mind the shabbiness of the buggy. As they jogged along he told her why he was in West Meadows. “I’m prospecting for marble on Bald Head. I’ll show you as we pass it, just where I mean to crack the nut. If I find marble I’ll put every last cent I’ve got—that means six hundred dollars at this moment!—into it. Now tell me about yourself.”

“I’m going out to China,” she said; “as a missionary.”

“What! A missionary?”

She nodded, smiling bravely.

"You *want* to go?" he said. He somehow couldn't believe it.

"Yes."

He looked at her keenly; she was very pretty, he thought. She had on a blue straw hat, with red cherries around the crown and under the brim. The wind was blowing tendrils of bright hair about her forehead, and her eyes were soft and gray, and there was a wild-rose color in her cheeks; and her mouth was the sweetest curving, timid thing imaginable! It seemed to him that there was a little quaver in her voice. "China," he said, watching the way her lips bent when her brief smile came, "China isn't so dreadfully far away nowadays."

"No."

"She *doesn't* want to go!" he said to himself. He had a sudden impulse to say what he thought of Mr. Alden's letting a little scared thing like Alice go off as a missionary. Aloud, he only declared that China was getting so civilized, that really—

"Father says that in some things the

Chinese are more civilized than we are. Only, they need Christianity.”

“Oh, of course,” he said. Between his dismay at the idea of this delicate child wandering out into lonely and unholy lands, and his desire to take away the dread which, instinctively, in spite of those faintly smiling lips, he felt was heavy on her heart, he did not know whether to encourage or to discourage her. Not that it made much difference which he did; he was to leave West Meadows in a day or two, and, unless those boulder-strewn pastures were very promising, he might never come back. If they were promising, he would open the quarry in the early spring; but by that time, he thought, ruefully, Alice would be urging the Chinese ladies to stop compressing their feet longitudinally, and teaching them to compress them latitudinally — probably with the added barbarity of Western civilization — high heels!

When they reached the red school-house in the woods, he squeezed himself down into a seat before one of the little desks, and sat

there watching Alice tidy the room for her class the next day. Of course he did all the talking; she answered mostly with "Yes," or, "No," and her pretty, speechless smile. Once he ventured his mild witticism about the Chinese ladies' feet, but there was no answering spark in her soft, unhumorous eyes. Indeed, she was even graver than usual when he left her in the twilight at the parsonage gate. For at the sound of his voice the old terror had stirred; that night, and for many nights after Neely had again vanished from West Meadows, she prayed passionately that fear might be taken out of her. For she was very much afraid.

Then, suddenly, her prayer was answered! Fear ceased. The whole machinery of purpose, the whole intention of her life, stopped short—her mother died.

In the morning, Mrs. Alden was packing one of Alice's trunks, praying to herself that her child might carry the Kingdom of Heaven to the Children of Destruction. At noon she had entered into the Kingdom herself.

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Husband and daughter staggered under the shock; not only because they loved her and because she had been hands and feet and brain to them, but because now the plan by which the life of all three of them had been directed, was shattered.

Of course Alice could not be a missionary.

Nobody said so, just at first. Mr. Alden, because he was too stunned to think of it. Alice, because the idea of even a brief postponement—which was all she admitted as possible—gave her, under her grief, a sense of relief which shocked her; and Cousin Mary, because to remember, at such a moment, that her thousand dollars had been spent in vain, was an impropriety. But, of course, as the grief-stricken household settled back into the commonplaces of daily living, the thought of how Mrs. Alden's death had changed everything was inescapable. It was William Alden who spoke of it first:

"I don't see how I *can* let Alice go!"

"You can't," said Miss Alden.

"But I must! I must!" he said, wearily.

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He and she were sitting in the garden, on a stone seat under a big silver poplar. Behind them, on the parsonage roof, the Virginia creeper spread its crimson cloak; the September sunshine, sifting down through the poplar's thinning leaves, fell on Miss Alden's good gray head and glinted in her kind eyes. "I wouldn't interfere with what Sam thinks is right for the world," William Alden said, his face quivering.

"It is right for her to stay at home! Of course she can't go kiting off to China now."

"She feels that the Lord has called her," Alice's father said.

"I have always noticed," said Mary Alden, "that the Lord never calls anybody to do two jobs at the same time. That's where He's not like us poor, foolish human critters! And when it comes to being a missionary or a daughter—the daughter job must be done first."

"But duty—" he began.

"When two duties jostle each other, one of 'em isn't a duty," Cousin Mary said, stoutly.

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“If she doesn’t go, all that money that you so generously spent—”

“Nonsense! It’s spent. That’s all there is to it. Thrown away, I suppose, for she certainly doesn’t need to speak Chinese to keep your house.”

William Alden was silent; he picked a blade of grass and tied it into knots; then he said, almost in a whisper:

“I know how sensible you always are, Mary; but . . . Ellen’s heart was set on it. No; nothing would induce me to interfere with what she wanted Alice to do!”

“She would want Alice to stay at home now, William.”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“*I’m* sure!” said Cousin Mary; “and I shall tell Alice so. I don’t like to, but I will. She’s a conscientious child, though I wish her conscience was ballasted with a sense of humor,—she hasn’t a particle! And she’ll see that her place is here with you.”

He looked at her with a sort of wistful admiration. “I never dare to decide people’s duties for them,” he said, simply.

"I'll have to screw myself up to it," she admitted.

It really took a good deal of screwing up; for to tell a girl she must resign the thing to which she has been looking forward for years—for all her life, in fact—is no easy matter. But it wasn't half so hard as Miss Alden supposed it would be. . . .

Alice burst out crying.

"Of course I expected *that*," Cousin Mary told the minister afterward; "but the real trouble was about that 'vow.'"

"I was afraid of that. I used to wish Ellen had stopped it. But Ellen knew best. I never interfered with anything Ellen thought right."

"Well, I just talked sense to the child," Miss Alden said.

She had been obliged to talk a great deal of sense.

"Why, how can I stay at home?" Alice had said. "It would be breaking my vow!" Her eyes were tragic with grief—and the terror of temptation.

"Well, but who will take care of your

father if you go? *I can't.* In the first place, I live in Boston; and in the second place, I would have no reputation left! William is only fifty-five, and I'm a young thing of forty-seven. Of course, just keeping house isn't so interesting as going off as a missionary; I admit that."

"But my vow!" Alice said, desperately. "I don't want to leave father—but my vow! And—and all the money you spent, Cousin Mary?"

"Oh, as to that—that's of no consequence. And as for vows, I don't believe in making them. But you do, and I see your point; you would think it wicked to break your word?"

"Yes," Alice breathed; "yes!"

Cousin Mary reflected. "Well, you didn't name a date in your vow, did you?"

"No," Alice said.

"Well, then," said Miss Alden, triumphantly, "don't you see? You can't go until you are no longer needed here. When you're not needed, you can go. Of course I realize how hard it is for you—"

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Alice made a gesture—then closed her lips.

“It’s hard to lose your career. But careers must wait for duty. Promise me you will do your duty to your father.”

Alice was silent.

“I suppose,” Cousin Mary said, “that it is virtually giving it up for good and all, because he will need you as long as he lives. Unless, of course, he should marry again,” she added, thoughtfully.

“Oh, he wouldn’t do that!” Alice said, with a gasp.

“You never can tell about men,” Miss Alden said; “still, it isn’t likely. So I think, Alice, you must face the fact that you probably will never go. Your father will live to make old bones.”

Alice dropped her face in her hands, and Miss Alden knew that she wept. But she did not know that the tears were of sheer, ashamed relief. “I will not go,” she said, at last, in a smothered voice.

“That’s a good girl!” said Miss Alden, heartily. “Now go down-stairs and tell

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your father you won't leave him. It will cheer him up, and he needs it—poor, dear William!"

But before she went down-stairs Alice locked her door and went down on her knees. "God, I *would* have gone; I would have kept my vow. I'm not backing out! I'll go—some time. I'm only deferring it. Don't you see? I can't go now, and leave father. I'm not backing out; I know I am lent to the Lord. But I simply *can't* go—yet. . . . Father will live to be ninety," she told herself; "then I will be—almost sixty!"

Fear was banished,—temporarily. It would be a long time before she was sixty!

So it was all settled. William Alden squeezed one thousand dollars from his meager bank-account—for here he would have his own way—and paid it back to Cousin Mary; there was a meeting of the sewing society to pack up Alice's outfit and ship it to the mission in Canton; a teachers' meeting to decide whether the fifty dollars' worth of books should be sold or donated to the Board; and the Chinese grammars

put on a shelf in William Alden's book-case.

Then the father and daughter began their sorrowful life together. Everything was just as it had been—except that the saintly soul who had held husband and child to a heavenly vision not their own, was gone.

As for Alice—"her mother's death has told on her," the church said, sympathetically. Certainly a new look had come into her face; yet it was not entirely grief. "Perhaps she worries over the housekeeping?" the good women of the congregation speculated. But it was not the housekeeping that troubled Alice; it was a dull ache of shame. "I didn't want to go," she told herself, miserably, "and I am *glad* it isn't right to leave father. Oh, how wicked I am!"

Of course no one knew that she was "wicked"; she was pitied and condoled with and told to "cheer up," because some day the way might be opened to her once more; told, even occasionally, that perhaps her father might marry again, and then she could go.

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Even her father looked forward—not to marrying again—but to a time when Alice might live her own life. . . . He was very miserable in that year that followed Mrs. Alden's death. His life was like a ruined house, crumbling and deserted and swept by chill winds. Alice's love was a fire glimmering and dancing on its broken hearth, at which he might warm his bewildered heart; for, without his Ellen's gentle insistence upon what she thought was right, his kindly, easy heart was perfectly bewildered. He scarcely knew what to think, much less say or do, about anything. The one thing that was clear to him was Alice's disappointment. So, more than once, he urged her to go to China. "I can get along, Sam," he would say, helplessly; "and your mother wanted you to go. I can't bear to interfere with what she thought right."

"She would think it was right for me to stay," Alice said, in her brief way; "Cousin Mary said so."

"Cousin Mary is very sensible," William Alden admitted; "but I feel selfish."

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He felt so selfish that, before the first year of bereavement had passed, the comfort of the little fire on his widowed hearth began to lessen. Alice's presence was bought, he thought, at the price of cruel self-sacrifice—and of another disappointment to her mother. "First, I failed Ellen," Mr. Alden thought; "and now, for my sake, Sam fails her."

It was a year later that, in one of his letters to Cousin Mary, his scruples found words: "*Sam tries not to let me see how disappointed she is at giving up her life-work; but of course I know it. Even Neely Henderson—who has opened up a quarry on Bald Head—spoke of it to me; he said he was 'glad Alice hadn't gone off to China, but it must have been a disappointment to her.'* The boy didn't realize how his words brought my selfishness home to me."

To which Miss Alden replied, briefly: "*Then stop being selfish. Get married, and let her go!*"

The idea was so startling to the saddened

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man that, after he had read the letter in the post-office, he trudged home in the rain, forgetting to raise his umbrella. "Get married?" Of course that would solve the problem. . . . If he had a wife to look after him, no "sense of duty" would keep Alice in West Meadows. "I suppose Ellen would think I ought to," he said, wretchedly. Then he had a glimmer of comfort. He couldn't think of anybody to marry!

"Your suggestion is practical," he wrote to Miss Alden, *"except for the fact that I am not acquainted with any lady who would be willing to do me so great a favor."*

Her reply was to the point: *"There are just as many ladies who would do you the 'favor' as there are old maids and widows in your congregation."*

Reading that laconic statement, Alice's father laughed as he had not laughed in a year.

That Neely Henderson, camping in a shack on the edge of his marble-quarry, was innocent of any intention of rousing the

Reverend Mr. Alden's conscience would have been clear to any one who knew how often the young man called at the parsonage, and with what exemplary regularity he went to church. It was clear to Alice. His reference to her thwarted career only meant his joy in the fact that it had been thwarted. She knew that he was glad she was safe and sound in America, in West Meadows, in the minister's pew right across the aisle, and—in another hour—walking home by his side to the parsonage! And, as they drew nearer and nearer to each other, William Alden felt more and more selfish.

So it came about that one day—his wife had been gone now more than two years—he girded himself, and went down to Boston to talk things over with Cousin Mary. She lived on the Hill, the old-fashioned part of Boston, in a brick house whose windows looked out on a small grass-plot inclosed by a rusty iron fence; it was shaded by lindens, and a little granite statue at each end added a classic suggestion that William Alden loved. And he loved the comfortable

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old house, and the gnarled wistaria that looped and knotted above the front door; and the good cooking, and the books, and the lively talk—which had sometimes pained his Ellen—and more than all these things, he loved and trusted the sensible, humorous woman who—though he had forgotten all about it—might have been his wife, if only, almost thirty years ago, she had been just a little less sensible! It was that sensibleness of hers which brought him down now from Vermont to ask advice.

“I always trust your judgment, Mary,” he explained. He was standing up in front of her sitting-room fire, with his coat-tails drawn forward under his arms. “I am spoiling Sam’s life, keeping her in West Meadows. What ought I to do? Ellen”—he sighed—“Ellen is being disappointed again.”

Miss Alden nodded. “I understand how you feel about that.”

“And you, Mary, you are disappointed, too, because you don’t feel that you have a missionary of your own in the field.” This

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was plainly an afterthought of obligation; his real dismay was on his dead wife's account.

Cousin Mary got up and began to nip off a withered leaf here and there on the row of geraniums on the window-sill. "I'm afraid I don't care so terribly much about having a missionary of my own, William. But I do feel badly about Ellen and Alice. And I should have liked to feel that Alice was teaching the yellow people to scrub, and to read their Bibles, too. I suppose I ought to have said that first?"

"As for Alice's being free to leave me," he said, "that suggestion of yours that I should—should . . . I think Ellen might agree with you, on Sam's account; and I really wouldn't mind marrying, just to please Ellen and to keep Sam from failing her. Yes; if I could find a woman who didn't set my teeth on edge, and who would be willing to take me with the understanding that—that she can't take Ellen's place, why, I'd—"

"In other words, if some woman would be a convenience?"

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"I'm afraid that's what it amounts to," he said, simply.

Miss Alden chuckled.

"Of course it wouldn't be fair to deceive one of those excellent ladies in my congregation," he said; "I'd have to confess that she would be a 'convenience'; and then she would very properly show me the door."

"Oh no, she wouldn't," said Miss Alden. "William . . ."

"Yes?"

"Ah, . . . William. Do *I* set your teeth on edge?"

"Mary!"

"I don't mind being a 'convenience'; and then Alice and Ellen could have their way."

He stared at her blankly. "My dear cousin—"

"Oh, if I set your teeth on edge, don't hesitate to say so!" She threw a handful of yellowing geranium leaves into the fire and gave a grunt of embarrassed laughter.

William Alden's dreamy face grew suddenly keen; he was remembering. . . . How many years ago was it? And he had

thought he would never get over her refusal; thought he was done with women! How young they had both been! How foolish! And then Ellen—

His throat tightened with pain. He had always been half afraid of Ellen; but he loved her, even if he was afraid of her. She had been like a light, a pure, cold light, shining on a high and heavenly path in which his careless feet had been too indolent to walk. If it hadn't been that Mary—all those years and years ago!—had been sensible enough to refuse him, he would never have had Ellen. He loved Mary, now, for not loving him then! And now, for Ellen's sake, that same wonderful common sense of hers would make it possible for him to fulfil the desire of Ellen's heart! His eyes blurred. "Mary Alden," he said, almost with passion, "you are—"

"I'm an old maid," she said, her eyes twinkling; "and you and I have been good friends all our lives. Of course I'm no more in love with you than I am with that chair! But you and Ellen wanted Alice to be a

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missionary, and the child has just lived for it. I was thinking of going to Europe; but I'd rather give Alice her career; and if you feel as I do about it—why, let's do it!" Then her face reddened. "Of course, I know this is a shocking thing for me to do. But as the world is constituted I really can't keep house for you on any other terms. Still—don't hesitate to say that it 'sets your teeth on edge.'"

"It doesn't," he said; "it only overwhelms me with a sense of your goodness. Mary, you are only—how old are you? Forty-nine? My dear girl, you ought to marry a younger man, who hasn't a wife in heaven to whom he gives what forlorn old heart he has left. You ought to marry—"

"Don't be a fool, William. Of course I'm not going to marry any younger man—or older man, either! I'm going to marry you—if you want me to. And Alice can go off to China with an easy conscience."

"Mary, I don't know how I can accept so great a kindness. I assure you that if it wasn't for Ellen I wouldn't think of it!"

They were both so in earnest that they neither of them saw the humor, under the circumstances, of such a remark. "It is a temptation," he said; "it would be such a joy to Ellen."

"Well, then, let's do it, for her sake. I'll get the child's clothes together," said Cousin Mary, beaming. "I declare, it will be worth a dollar to me just to tell her she can go! I shall never forget how hard it was to tell her she couldn't."

William Alden's face relaxed into satisfaction; the pain of missing Alice was inevitable, but at least she should have her heart's desire! "If you really mean it," he said, "if you can do this great thing for Ellen and Sam, why not go back with me to West Meadows? I can see the Board tomorrow morning, make all the arrangements for Alice to go, then we can take the noon train; and by supper-time she will know it!—We can get married in the morning," he added, in a placid afterthought.

"Gracious!" said Cousin Mary; "'this is so sudden'! What do you suppose I would

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do with my house? Just go off and leave it permanently? No, no; there's no such killing hurry. I'll go back with you to West Meadows, and start in on the sewing. There's a lot to do to get Alice ready. Then after she has started, if you are still of the same mind—"

"You need have no doubt about *that!*"

"Well, don't write a word of it to Alice," she cautioned him. "I want the pleasure of telling her she can go myself!"

CHAPTER III

“**B**UT I haven’t any money to speak of,” Neely said; to which Alice made hopeful response:

“If there is a lot of marble in the hill you’ll have money, won’t you?”

“If—if,” he echoed; “and if I can get the capital to swing it!”

He was to start that night, on the evening stage, for a fortnight in New York, where he had hopes of securing this “capital.” “But if I can’t interest a banker or some big man,” he said, gloomily, “if I have to swing it myself, it will be just swapping dollars.”

He had come up to the school-house among the pines to say good-by to her, and also to help in the usual Saturday-afternoon cleaning and tidying of the bare little room, so that it would be fresh and sweet for Alice’s Sunday-school the next day. The

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work done, she was sitting on the door-step in the December sunshine, resting, before starting back. Jim, hitched to the fence, turned a mild eye upon them and wondered at their slowness in getting back to oats.

Alice still had the broom in her hands, and sometimes, as she listened to Neely's anxious talk of ways and means and marble, she brushed it back and forth over the foot-worn patch of bare ground in front of the step.

Cornelius looked at the pure outline of her face and at the little curls at the nape of her slender neck, and words that had been hot upon his lips for the last two months struggled to escape. He put his hand over his mouth and held them prisoner.

"I've got to have something better to offer than a hole in the ground," he was saying to himself; "if I can just scratch up some capital, I'll risk it!" So, a little huskily, he spoke of common things—the weather, her Sunday-school, even of that old plan

of going to China. "I'm mighty glad you didn't go!"

Those imprisoned words must have called for freedom through his voice; at any rate, something brought a flush into Alice's face.

"I might have saved souls," she said, briefly; then, in spite of her happy color, she sighed.

"You will save my soul by staying!" he said. The prisoner words, hammering against the bars of his will, made his heart beat so violently that his breath almost failed him.

The rose flush in Alice's face deepened; but she only said, simply: "I think of China. A good deal."

Neely nodded. "I understand," he said.

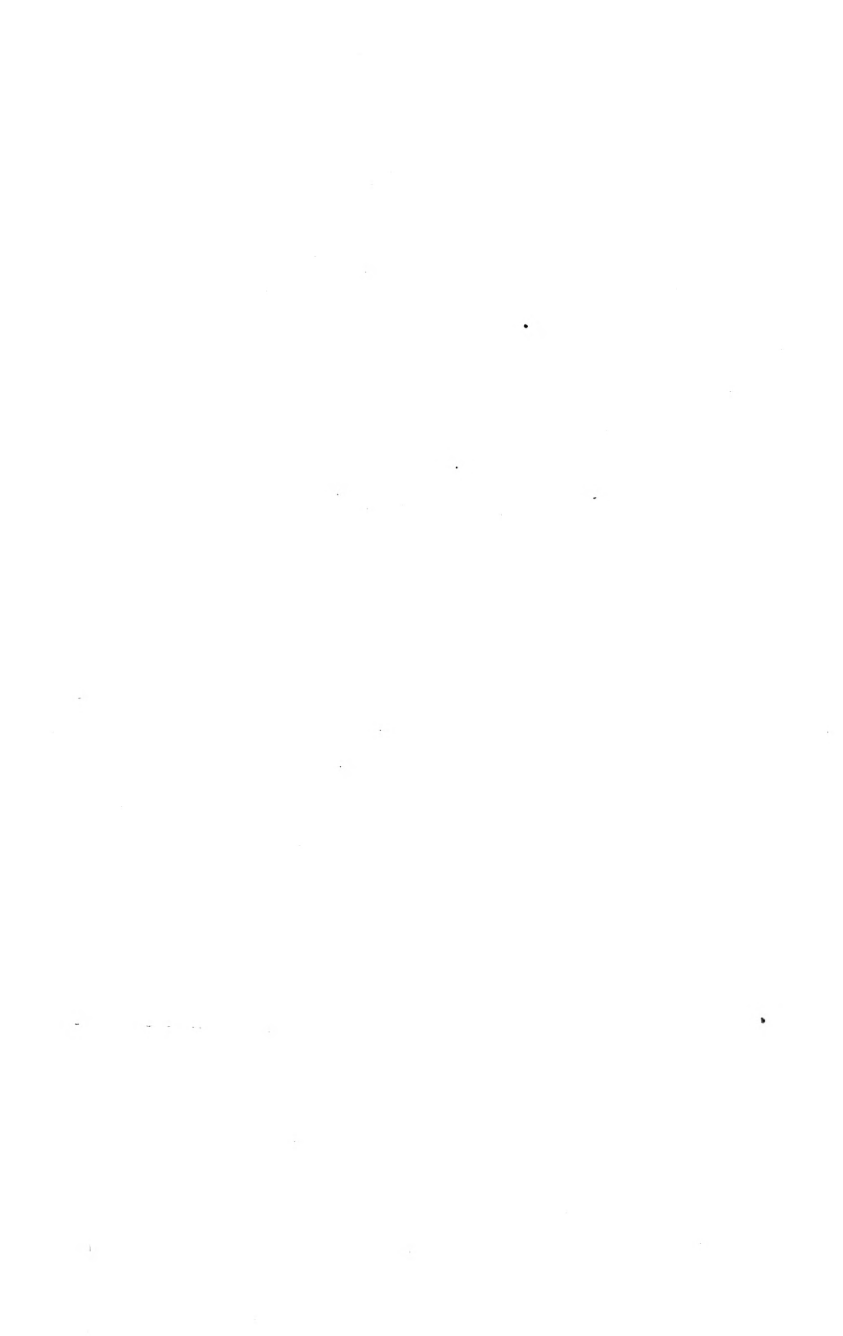
She shook her head. "Nobody understands."

"You couldn't leave your father," he reminded her.

"No," she agreed; then looked at him with dumb eyes, which tried to confess: "but I was *glad* I couldn't." Aloud, she said that

"I might have saved souls," she said, bricly; then, in spite of her happy color, she sighed.





it was time to start home. "Jim wants his oats."

"I'll be back in West Meadows in two weeks at the latest; maybe sooner," Neely said. As he spoke, those other words, locked behind his sensible young lips, climbed up and looked out of his eyes—and before he knew it they were free!

"Oh, I wish I needn't ever go away from you, Alice!"

"I—I must put the broom in the closet," she said, faintly, and rose.

"Alice!" he said. He caught her hand, and stood trembling; then he kissed her, holding her tight in his arms.

"Oh," Alice said, and dropped the broom.

"Kiss me!" he said; but it was he who kissed her. Then he let her slip out of his arms, and they looked at each other. "If you had gone to China we shouldn't have known—we cared," he said, with a sort of sob. It was as if he saw a dreadful danger which he had escaped. He knew that she saw it, too.

"I *would* have gone," she said, "if—"

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He felt her tremble. "I would have had to go," she insisted in a whisper; "but dear mother—poor mother—" She laid her cheek on his arm, and he felt she was crying.

"You would rather have gone—and lost me a thousand times over!—than have had her die," he comforted her. It was wonderful how he divined her dismay at the significance there was in her gratitude for having been spared for him.

"Oh, I *would*," she said in a smothered voice.

He could not see her face, but he put his lips on her soft hair. They stood there for a minute in silence; then he said, "We'll both take care of your father now," at which she put her lips against his coat-sleeve and kissed it. How he understood! In her speechless way, she knew what adoration meant.

As they drove home it seemed as if there was no end to his understanding. . . . He spoke of that missionary career gently, with reverence, as one speaks of something beautiful and dead. He did not let his own joy

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that it was dead break in upon its sacredness. He spoke of all he would try to be to Mr. Alden. He even assented to Alice's sudden reminder:

"I gave up going, to be with father—while he lives; if he—if anything should happen—"

"It won't. Because he isn't so very old, you know. He will live for years and years and years! And need you always. You never could leave him—and me."

"No," she said, briefly; "but if it wasn't for taking care of him I couldn't . . . get married."

The mere word made his head spin!

"How soon can we be married? Oh, Alice, won't you be willing right off? Next month, perhaps?"

"Goose," she said, radiantly.

"We'll be poor," he said, "but what do we care? We'll have money enough to—to love on!" he exulted. "My balance is eight hundred and sixty dollars now. I wasn't going to say a word," he confessed. "I did try not to; but I'm glad I did."

"If you hadn't, I—couldn't have lived," she said.

Cornelius caught his breath under the soft shock of her confession. "I'm not good enough for you," he said, passionately; and began to drive with one hand; indeed—Jim being headed for his oats!—there was just a minute when he let the reins fall on the dashboard and didn't drive at all. "What can I ever do to make you as happy as you make me?" he breathed.

"Love me," she said in a whisper, and laid her sweet, cold cheek against his. The tears leaped to his eyes. But he had no words to match them; he only laughed, with a break in his voice, and said:

"*Love* you? Ask me something I don't do every minute, every breath!" Then he took up the reins again. "Ask me to—to die, or chuck up the quarry, or—or anything," he said, "just to show you!"

After that they were both able to laugh and be a little more matter-of-fact; though all the while, under his eager talk—Alice, smiling, did not talk at all—he was tense

with the wonder of what had happened to him.

He left her on her side of the parsonage gate, saying, "Good-by"; decorously enough, then, as she turned away, he flung the gate open, and ran after her, catching her behind a great hemlock all powdery with snow, and saying good-by all over again! Then he left her, her cheeks burning, so happy, so confused, so gaily foolish, that, up-stairs in her own room, changing her dress for tea, she even tried putting up her hair in a new way, all the while smiling at herself in the little swinging mirror on the high bureau.

It was while she was wrapping the chestnut braids round and round behind her ears that, in the wintry dusk, the afternoon stage drew up at the door, and, running to the window, she saw her father step out, a little clumsily, for he was carrying a bird-cage. Then he turned and extended a hand to Cousin Mary Alden. Alice gave a little shriek of delight.

"Oh, joy!" she said, under her breath.

“What *have* we got for supper?” She ran back to the looking-glass for two more hair-pins, then flew down-stairs, out of the front door, and along the path to the gate. “Cousin Mary will help me make my wedding-clothes!” she was saying to herself. Aloud, she was (for her) almost voluble with hospitality: “Oh, father, how *did* you get her to come?”

“Look out for Dicky’s cage!” said Cousin Mary. “You darling child, give me a kiss! Why, you’ve fixed your hair a new way! William, why didn’t you tell me she’d fixed her hair a new way? Well, have you got enough supper to go around? And for Heaven’s sake keep the cat away from Dicky!”

Alice, kissing her father, caught up a bandbox, and said Dicky was perfectly safe. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here!”

They went up the path together, a very happy group; the two elders—full of the news they were going to tell her—exchanging glances of satisfaction; and Alice, full of the news she was going to tell them as soon

as she could bring herself to speak of it—it was so hard for her to speak! “Cousin Mary and I will begin to sew,” she was thinking, with swift visions of lovely, ruffy things. “And I’ll do a lot of embroidery! Though I can’t be married for ages, in spite of what that foolish Neely says.”

“You’ve got to stay a *long* time,” she told the guest; “I won’t let you off with any stingy fortnight or so—”

Cousin Mary winked at the minister and then looked just a little conscious. It isn’t entirely easy to tell a girl you are going to be her stepmother! Still, the child had too much sense not to understand. . . .

“We’ve got some news for you, Sam,” Mr. Alden said.

Alice did not hear. She was untying Cousin Mary’s bonnet and giving her another hug, in the midst of which Miss Alden said, chuckling: “It isn’t a visit this time, Alice. I’m going to stay; and you”—her voice was gay with achievement—“and you can go to China!”

“Yes, Sam,” William Alden said, “it’s

all arranged. And it's Cousin Mary who has made it possible."

Alice stood stock-still. Her lips slowly parted, her eyes dilated. "What?" she said, and gasped. "I—I don't understand," she said, faintly.

They had not meant to tell her so soon; they had planned that the great news should come gradually. They were going to tell her quietly, after supper, in the study. But, in spite of themselves, it just burst out:

"I'm going to stay always, Alice, so that you may be a missionary!"

Alice swayed for a moment, and things grew black in front of her. Cousin Mary was instant in catching her in her kind, capable arms, and laying her softly on the lounge. "A glass of water, William!" she said; and then fanned the white-faced girl with the nearest thing she could find—*The Spirit of Missions*, as it happened, with its pages still uncut.

"It startled you," she reproached herself. "Thank you, William. Here, drink this, Alice. Now! You're all right, only lie still

for a while. William, go off somewhere, will you? We ought to have prepared her. No, don't talk, my darling child; just lie still. And think how happy you are! You made your sacrifice, but now everything has come round right for you, and you may go ahead and do what you want!"

She kissed Alice gently; her kind eyes were full of tears. Alice's own eyes were closed; her lips trembled.

"Thank you," she said in a whisper.

"I'll give your father his supper," said Cousin Mary; "you just lie quietly here. After a while I'll bring you a cup of tea."

But as she moved away Alice caught at her dress. "How can you stay?" she said, faintly. "You said—when mother died—it wouldn't be—proper."

"Oh, bless my heart!" said Cousin Mary. "I forgot. Why, we are going to be married, dear, your father and I. I forgot to mention it. Of course we shall have to be married. You have no foolish feeling about a stepmother? You are too sensible for that! I won't be a stepmother at all; I'll just be

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‘Cousin Mary’ to the end of the chapter. There’s no question of taking your dear mother’s place with your father, or with you, either! It is only just a way to make it possible for you to have your great desire. You understand, dear child, don’t you?”

“Yes. I understand. . . . Thank you, Cousin Mary.”

CHAPTER IV

“SHE was simply overcome by it,” Miss Alden told her cousin. “William, to see that child’s happiness ought to pay you for your sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice?” he protested. “What are you talking about? You are the one who will make the sacrifice! I only hope Sam’s happiness will repay you.”

They were at the supper-table. Alice was still shaky from that moment of faintness, and Cousin Mary was far too good a nurse to let her get on her feet. “Just lie there and be happy, dear,” she had said. And Alice, with closed eyes, lay there.

“How shall I tell Neely?” she was saying to herself. And then: “Cousin Mary won’t have to sew my wedding-clothes. And I won’t embroider—anything.” At that, curiously enough, she suddenly cried a little. The other dismay was too great for tears.

Her numb mind tried to grasp it: "Neely. I suppose he will . . . be disappointed." The tears ceased. "I suppose I'll never see him any more."

She could hear the voices in the dining-room, and she felt a surge of blind anger. Why were they doing this thing? Pushing her off to China! And all the happy sewing she was going to do! Again the tears came. "I'll have to say good-by to him forever;"—and again the tears dried.

It seemed to her as if Neely was dead. She felt faint, and the comfortable voices in the dining-room sounded far away. But in all the waves and billows of thought that went over her in the next hour, there was not one which even remotely suggested that she should not fulfil the promise of her life.

By the next day she was apparently entirely herself, except that her lips were rather colorless, and Cousin Mary insisted that she should not go to church. So that morning she lay very still on her little bed and stared blindly out into the sunny winter day. Through her window she could see the

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graveyard lying under its white coverlet, and the bare branches of the elms throwing lovely shadows back and forth across the fluted columns of the church porch.

By and by the bell began to ring with shrill insistence, and before it stopped she could see the people coming in twos and threes along the street. Then the bell stopped ringing, and the bright silence of the peaceful day fell again. Alice lay still. "I've got to think it out," she said to herself. But when she tried to think, something seemed to slip in her mind, as a cog might slip in a machine. Instead of thinking, she listened to the muffled sound of singing:

"All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with mirth—"

"Mirth!" Could there ever again be such a thing in the world as "mirth"? She was almost frightened by the resentment which rose like a wave in her mind. "I'm a nice person to go as a missionary!" she told herself. "Oh, why did I promise

mother? *Why* did I make that vow?" She rolled over on her face, and tried to pray; but all she could say was, "Neely—Neely . . ."

After a long while she got up and took her little writing-pad on her knee and wrote the inevitable letter. It was very brief. When you announce a death, what is there to say but the fact? Alice's "fact" was that the hope of happiness and love was dead. So all she needed say was:

"We can't get married. . . ."

After she had written these words, she drew little pictures on her blotting-paper for a while; then she wrote some more: "Father is going to marry Cousin Mary so I may be free to go to China. So I am going. I made a vow that I would. . . ."

When her father and Cousin Mary came home from church, Alice, up and dressed, was full of questions: How soon could she start? Was she to stay at the Mission in Canton, or go directly to her post? What clothing had she better take?

And underneath all the questions lay, cold and still, her own staggering, speechless

fact. She tried not to think of it—she even tried not to think of that letter she had written to Neely, and when it would reach him, and how he would “take it.” If she thought of that, she would break down.

Once her stunned mind framed the hope that he would not come back to West Meadows before she started for China. “Because if he does . . . If he talks to me—oh, will I be strong enough to say ‘No’? I will have to put my hands over my ears,” she thought. She wondered about her power to endure Neely’s “talk,” just as, long ago, in her little cotton dress, with fagots piled about her knees, she had wondered whether she could endure the flames of martyrdom; and now, as then, it was Neely who was going to apply the testing torch!

For the next three days she worked herself to exhaustion, so that when night fell, thought could be drowned in sleep.

On the third day came a despatch.

“Who on earth is telegraphing you, Sam?” said Mr. Alden. Telegrams were almost unknown at the parsonage, and his

first thought was that it was from the Board, making some final arrangement for Alice's departure. He saw her tear the envelop open and heard a gasp. . . . "When do they want you to start?" he asked.

Speechlessly, she handed him the despatch:

You can't go I won't let you I'm coming back
C. H.

"Who's coming back?" he said, bewildered. "You 'can't go'—go where? 'C. H.'—who is 'C. H.'?"

"Neely," Alice said, faintly.

And then the truth dawned on the Reverend Mr. Alden. His face changed; amazement, then amusement,—then consternation! Again Ellen was to be disappointed.

"Of course I'm glad not to lose Sam," he thought, confusedly; "but—" Then he called, loudly:

"Mary! Mary!"

When Mary Alden, hearing her name shouted, appeared in the doorway, he said, with a dismayed laugh: "Mary, I have got

you here under false pretenses. This child is going to be married!"

Miss Alden and Alice spoke both together:

"But I'm not!"

"But she's going to China!"

"What on earth—" Miss Alden began.

"Alice is engaged to Neely Henderson. I couldn't think who 'C. H.' was, for a minute, Sam. Yes. She won't go to China, so I suppose you're out of it—I mean our arrangement. The lamb has been provided; Isaac doesn't have to be offered up." He frowned. He was plainly upset.

Miss Alden sat down. She was confused to the point of irritation. "Will somebody please explain?" she said.

Alice, standing, trembling, in the middle of the room, clutching Neely's telegram so tightly that her fingers were white, said, briefly:

"I've broken the engagement. We only got engaged on Saturday."

"Sam," her father said, impatiently, "I don't understand. Do you want to go to China, or don't you?"

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“I want to.”

“Well, you can”—Mr. Alden began, and paused; “but—” He paused again.

Mary Alden was silent; she looked at her cousin and gave a little shrug. “I seem to have put my foot into it, William.” Then she laid her hand on Alice’s shoulder. “My dear, what do you *want* to do? Marry Neely, or go to China?”

“China,” Alice said, in a whisper,—then slipped away, leaving her precipitate elders looking at each other, confused, and even a little angry. At least Cousin Mary was angry.

“Why didn’t she tell you what was in the air?” she said. “Well, of course, William, this lets us out!”

“But if she wants to go?” he said. “And—and—I don’t want to be let out, Mary.”

“I am sure she doesn’t want to go!” said Miss Alden; “so I shall just retire gracefully into the background.”

“She won’t agree to that; and, after all, Mary, wouldn’t we take a good deal upon ourselves, you and I, to decide her life for

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her? She's got to make up her own mind. I don't think she'd ever be happy if she felt that she *might* have kept her vow, and didn't."

"Upon my word," said Cousin Mary, "I never saw such a mixed-up mess!"

CHAPTER V

CORNELIUS HENDERSON'S rush back to West Meadows—leaving that desired capital suspended in midair!—was filled with furious plans of what he was going to say to Alice's father. He only hoped that when he should present his arguments and protests and entreaties to the unnatural parent who was thrusting his daughter out into heathendom, he would be able to keep his temper!

And this "Cousin Mary"—what kind of a woman was she, anyhow, wanting to get married at her time of life? She was looking for a home, that was what she was after! A home! Nobody need talk to him, Neely Henderson, about devotion to the cause of missions; *he* could see through her. Alice was too pure and beautiful to suspect anybody; she thought this stepmother business was all religious purpose.

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“Religious grandmother!” said Neely, staring out of the car window and grinding his teeth with rage. “I’ll have to be civil to her father; I can’t let Alice see how I feel about him. But I don’t know how I am to be half decent to—that woman! Busting in on Alice’s plans, just to feather her own nest. Well, if she wants to get rid of Alice, I’ll take her,—next week! She needn’t pack her off to China so she can get a home for herself.”

He reached West Meadows Sunday afternoon, and stopped at the parsonage door only long enough to learn that Alice had gone, as usual, to her Sunday-school class in the woods. He did not wait even to say How do you do? to Mr. Alden—“I’ve got to straighten Alice out first,” he told himself. Aloud he said, very coldly, to Cousin Mary, who had seen him tearing up the path to the front door and gone to welcome him, “I’ll drive back with Alice.” Then he rushed off for a four-mile walk through the snow, out to the red school-house. When it came into sight among the pines his heart rose

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in his throat; she was there, alone, and scared—poor little darling!—half to death. Well—he would save her! All the heathen in the world should not rob him of his girl.

Sunday-school was over; the loggers' children, jostling one another in the narrow doorway, had flocked out into the snow, the girls sputtering at the cold, the boys molding icy snowballs in their mittened hands; then their voices, shrill and raucous, had died away up the lonely road.

Alice was alone in the small, close room, where a melon-shaped iron stove stood between two tiers of battered desks that were scarred by generations of jack-knives, and stained and spotted with varying tastes in ink. She opened all the windows and the frosty air flowed in, crystal clear and clean, smelling of pines and glinting with the level rays of the great copper sun that was sliding down the translucent greenness of the western sky.

When the room was fresh and cold she closed the windows, put some small birch logs into the stove, and then sat down at

one of the little desks and rested her chin in the palms of her hands.

Neely had squeezed himself into this same seat, before this same desk, that afternoon when he first came out to see her at the school-house. Remembering it, her breath fluttered into a sob. "Oh!" she said, faintly. Then she put her hands over her face and bowed her head on the desk.

The yellow light on the eastern wall lifted and lifted, then suddenly was gone,—the sun had dropped below the pines, below the hills—and the five-o'clock dusk was flooding the room like a tide. The birch logs crackled in the stove. Suddenly she heard a step on the path. As she raised her head to listen, Neely burst in:

"Alice!"

Before she could rise he flung his arms around her, lifted her, and caught her roughly to his breast. "I won't let you go, you know," he said, hoarsely.

Then he put her back again before the little desk, and knelt down beside her. He gave her no chance to speak. She could

only hide her face on his shoulder and listen while he burst out with all the pent-up pain and fear and love of the last few days:

“I’ll never give you up! You’re mine. I don’t care what your father says—”

It wasn’t until he stopped for breath that she could make him listen to her; and when she spoke his rage collapsed with a completeness that made him stammer:

“Wh-what! Mr. Alden *isn’t* making you go?”

“‘Making me’? Of course not. He is willing. That’s all.”

“But he isn’t urging you?” Neely repeated, incredulously.

“I don’t need urging. I am going.”

“Your father won’t let you, when I tell him—”

“Yes, he will. He asked Cousin Mary to marry him just so I could.”

“You belong to me!”

“I promised.”

“You promised me!”

The little school-house was growing dark,

and the fire in the stove was out. Only when he felt her shivering would he stop talking. Then he wrapped her up in the moth-eaten buffalo-robe, and, to keep it tightly about her, he drove with one hand all the way back to West Meadows.

“I think I see a way to straighten out this business,” he said, grimly; but he did not tell her what the way was. He was too busy thinking just how he could tell Miss Alden that if she would please keep out of it, the “business” would settle itself. “If she will just stop marrying Mr. Alden, Alice *can't* go! That's the thing to tell her.”

He was so busy thinking up arguments to make Miss Alden stop getting married that he had very little to say to Alice. She had nothing to say to him—for she, too, was busy, bracing herself to keep her vow against the flaming “talk” which she knew would come later. So, for the most part, on the ride home, only the sleigh-bells broke the crystal silence of the winter night. But when he left her at her father's door he did not apply any torch; he only said, quietly:

“I’m coming in to-night to talk to Mr. Alden. We will straighten this thing out, darling.”

He talked to Mr. Alden for three nights, and days, too—whenever he could make the minister listen to him! But somehow the thing didn’t straighten out. Of course by this time Neely—so ready to battle against the bulwarks of paternal selfishness and cousinly sentimentality!—had admitted that nobody was either selfish or sentimental. Mr. Alden was anxiously impersonal: Alice must do what she thought right. And he thought it would be right for her to be true to her promise to Neely. “However, that is a matter for her own conscience to decide,” he ended, with a worried look.

Cousin Mary, also impersonal, was of the same opinion: it was right for Alice to stay at home. “Still, if she thinks she ought to go, she can,” said Cousin Mary, much perplexed.

To protest against such negative declarations was like striking the air. Yet, all the same, when Neely struck out to get his girl,

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his blows did fall upon something hard, something that resisted, something which did not yield, which stood firm and said, in a whisper, "No."

On that third night, Alice, worn out with the struggle, had gone to bed, leaving her father and lover arguing in the study. "She insists," William Alden said, "that she is vowed to the Lord. I have done all I can for you, short of tying her to the bedpost—that I won't do!"

"But she's vowed to me!" Cornelius said, distractedly. He had already said it a dozen times in the last hour.

"I know. But she promised her mother. And, Neely, I'm afraid—knowing Sam—she would never be happy if she broke her word."

"But when her mother died Alice stayed with you? That was breaking her word."

"No; then she only deferred going; and now," Mr. Alden explained, "she doesn't have to stay with me, because my cousin, Miss Alden, will—will marry me."

"But if Miss Alden backs out?" Neely said, eagerly.

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“That would be too much like forcing Alice to stay at home,” the minister said, despairingly. “Alice must gang her own gait, when it comes to conscience. And”—he paused; it was not easy to speak of himself to the boy—“Alice’s mother had always hoped that—that I would be moved to devote my life to mission work; and I—didn’t. Her heart was set on Alice’s doing it.”

“I don’t think that justifies you in letting Alice go now,” Neely said, bluntly. “She has never wanted to be a missionary.” He got on his feet and tramped about the study. “I can’t make any impression on her,” he said; “all the same, I won’t let her go. *I’ll* tie her to the bedpost, if you won’t! She loves me and I love her, and I won’t let her go.”

“Well, you’ll run a great risk if you force her,” Alice’s father said; “*I* wouldn’t dare to do such a thing.”

“I shall dare,” said Neely.

But even as they spoke, Cousin Mary had come to the rescue. She had been very silent during these last few days. To Mr.

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Alden's declaration that he didn't propose to force Alice's conscience, she replied, briefly: "We must do whatever is best for the child, of course. But I'm blessed if I know what *is* best." Consternation at what Neely frankly called "the box" into which her offer to Mr. Alden had put all four of them, was making her half sick. "Why was I so precipitate?" she reproached herself. Yet she had almost nothing to say. "I've put my foot in it once," she reflected; "so the best thing I can do now is to hold my tongue."

But that night her tongue broke loose. . . . Neely had stayed until Mr. Alden was almost obliged to show him the door! Now, when the lights were out and the household was settling to sleep, Cousin Mary came into Alice's room, and sat on the edge of her bed.

"I have tried not to give advice," she said, "because I know that's my weak point—advising people. Besides, of course, I realize that I am responsible for mixing things up. But, really and truly, I think you are making a mistake."

"I promised mother," Alice said, faintly.

"And you promised Neely," said Cousin Mary. "Now, Alice, listen: When one promise jostles another, one of 'em isn't a promise."

Alice agreed: "The one to Neely isn't."

"Well, that's as you look at it," said Miss Alden. "Personally, I think it is. But never mind that. You've got to do what *you* think is right, not what I think is right. And I suppose what would, or would not make you happy, is not a thing for you to consider?"

"No!" Alice agreed, passionately. "My happiness has nothing to do with it!" It was a relief to her, after these days of Neely's arguments for her happiness, to be told the truth.

"I should think his happiness might be a consideration?" Cousin Mary said.

Alice slowly shook her head; but she gasped faintly with pain.

"Of course, you'll get your happiness out of being a missionary," said Miss Alden; "I realize that."

Alice was silent.

“But we will only consider what is right. We’ll leave the question of happiness, for either of you, out of it. It wouldn’t be right for you to leave your father—while he needs you?”

“No,” Alice said. “That’s why I didn’t go when mother died.”

“Well,” said Miss Alden, and paused; then she sighed and shrugged her shoulders. (“Here I am, putting my foot into it again!”) “Well, Alice, I suppose I’ve got to put the screws on: You can’t go and leave him now any more than you could two years ago.”

“Can’t leave father? But you—”

“I—what?”

“You are going to marry him.”

“I’m not.”

“You are—*not*?”

“Why should I?” Miss Alden asked.

Alice, in her bewilderment, sat up in bed and looked at her cousin. “Because—” she began.

“You needn’t think,” said Cousin Mary,

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“that *I* am going to help you break that boy’s heart! Go off as a missionary, if you want to. But if you do, William will have nobody to look after him.”

Alice fell back on her pillows, breathless.

“I am not going to do your work,” said Miss Alden; “so it looks to me as if you’d have to stay at home. And, that being the case, you might as well, incidentally, marry that poor, distracted Neely.”

Alice threw her arms around her and burst out crying. “Oh, I would have gone!” she said. “I *would* have gone!”

“So it’s settled,” said Miss Alden, the next day; “and it lets you out, William. But I declare I was never made to be a surgeon and operate on other people’s consciences!”

“It seems like interference with what Alice thinks is right; it seems like settling her life for her,” the minister said, frowning.

“Well! Heaven knows the other plan was ‘interference’!”

“No; that was just letting her go back

to her own idea of what was right," he insisted. He was very much disturbed. "Of course I'm glad to have her stay at home, for purely selfish reasons. But for Ellen's sake—"

"Now, William, be sensible," Miss Alden urged. "This is plain common sense. Of course she ought to marry Neely. I rushed in, with the best intentions in the world, and upset the whole kettle of fish. Now I shall simply rush out. That's all there is to it!"

"But if you 'rush out,' as you call it, we shall be preventing Alice from doing what she feels she ought to do. I can't tell you, Mary, how I dread anything like interfering. I always have. And, besides, I think our plan was—very sensible."

"Nonsense!" said Miss Alden.

CHAPTER VI

THINGS settled back, after the flurry of excitement, into the old pleasant ways. Cousin Mary spent the rest of the month with them; Alice took care of her father and dreamed of Neely; Neely, as time passed, added dollar by dollar to his precious balance, and dreamed of Alice. Their engagement made no practical difference in their lives. As for that bridal sewing, which Alice had looked forward to and then resigned, she took it up now as a long and leisurely occupation. But sometimes as she sewed she sighed.

There was no question of the immediate marriage Neely desired; in spite of the fact that he had secured a little capital for the quarry, and that he was convinced that he, personally, had enough to "love on"—"I have a balance of eight hundred and fifty in the bank," Neely boasted—Mr. Alden would not hear of their getting married.

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“Wait a couple of years,” he said; “or perhaps in a year and a half—we’ll see.”

In his own mind he meant to let them marry in a year and a half. “When they do, of course they will have to live with me for a while,” he had told Cousin Mary; “they wouldn’t have money enough to set up for themselves. That’s the only thing that will reconcile me to being a millstone round their necks!”

“I’d let ’em be poor together, now,” she had urged; “there’s nothing like being poor together, when young people get married.” But William Alden wouldn’t agree to that—“so I might as well go home,” Cousin Mary told herself. And she went back to Boston to her own house, that looked out on the square inclosed in its rusty iron fence, and on the big lindens that shadowed the two little granite statues. “After all,” she reflected, “William and I are too old to make experiments. Perhaps I can go to Europe next winter. Oh, yes; it’s better this way. *I’m satisfied!*”

In fact, as the winter passed, everybody

seemed to be satisfied. The parish was entirely contented, because, although it had not a missionary of its own, the minister displayed no intention of inflicting upon it a second wife, whom none of the eligible ladies would have thought worthy of him! Alice's father was satisfied because Alice was happy. Neely, because Providence—and Cousin Mary—had, as he expressed it, "knocked China higher than a kite." Indeed, Neely was so fully satisfied that he accepted the year and a half of waiting with fairly good grace. He never admitted the possibility of its being two years.

"I've got a balance," he boasted to Alice in September, "of twelve hundred dollars. I bet it'll be sixteen hundred by spring. This time next year I'll have you! When your father sees how well the quarry's doing, he'll cave; you see if he doesn't!" So Neely was satisfied.

Everybody was satisfied but Alice. Always, in the back of her mind, lay the knowledge that she had not been honest. "I *could* have gone," she told herself over

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and over; "and I pretended to believe I couldn't." Sometimes, when she was very unhappy, she told Neely so. "If I had insisted on going, Cousin Mary would have given in and married father." When she said things like this, her eyes would fill with self-reproach, until he had a desperate feeling that he must do something—anything!—to take the pain away. "If I could just get her," he used to think, toiling down in the bowels of the quarry, "I could make her forget those wretched Chinese!"

Then suddenly he got her . . .!

"It's the sort of thing," Alice gasped, "that happens in story-books!"

Certainly it doesn't happen to most people outside of story-books. . . .

The story-book happening—they had been engaged a little more than a year—was the death of the uncle in California, and a legacy to Alice of ten thousand dollars.

It came out of a clear sky. Nobody in West Meadows had heard that the uncle had died. Alice hardly knew of his existence. William Alden had forgotten everything

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about him, except that somewhere, in the back of his mind, he dimly remembered the Californian's reply to that appeal, made so many years ago, for help to send Alice to China. He remembered that, because it had made him laugh—until he saw that it made his wife cry; then he had been properly serious. But now the advocate of the conversion of Christian Chinese back to the faith of their fathers was dead, and in his will had left ten thousand dollars to "my niece, who wanted to corrupt the Confucians, but wisely decided not to."

"What does he mean by that?" Alice said.

Mr. Alden chuckled in spite of himself. "I'm afraid your uncle was a good deal of a heathen," he said. "Ten thousand dollars!"

It was a May day when the great news came—a lawyer's letter, inclosing a copy of the will. Mr. Alden had brought the letter home at noon, and Alice, opening it casually at the dinner-table, said, "What on earth is this?"

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Her father put out a hand for the sheets of paper, glanced over the first page, and whistled. "You are an heiress, my dear!"

But when he explained, Alice said it must be a joke. "Me? Why, but he didn't know me!"

Then Mr. Alden read the paragraph about the Confucians. "Now you two youngsters can get married!" he said.

Alice, whose heart, from the minute that she understood what had happened to her, had been singing over the same words, grew a little pink, and said, "I don't know how Neely will feel about that."

"Don't be a humbug, Sam," her father retorted; "you might go out to the quarry this afternoon and ask if Barkis is willin'."

"Let's go!" she said.

"Better go down to Boston while Cousin Mary is there"—Cousin Mary was planning to start in the autumn upon the long-delayed trip to Europe—"and buy your wedding-dress."

At that she grew very pink; but she

could not say much, except, "Neely will have to decide."

That afternoon she and her father drove out to Bald Head in the minister's shabby, sagging old buggy. They drew up before the quarry shed, and Mr. Alden got out and, going over to the shallow excavation, watched Neely guiding the long arm of the derrick that was shifting a cube of marble, glimmering white in the May sunshine. When the block rested on the ground, Mr. Alden signaled Neely with his whip. The young man—owner and boss and workman all in one!—looking up, saw his visitors and waved his hand; then clambered to the green brink of the quarry. Alice hitched old Jim, and came over to stand beside her father, who was bursting with news.

"Well, young man," he said, "so you are going to marry money, are you?"

"Sir?" said Neely.

"You are looking out for a rich wife," Mr. Alden declared.

"What's the joke?" Cornelius inquired, grinning.

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“Neely! Something wonderful has happened!” Alice broke in. She caught his grimy hand in hers. “Neely, there’s money. For the quarry.”

“What! More capital?” His eyes started with astonishment. “Alice! Tell me! What in thunder—who?”

“Me,” she said.

Neely looked at Mr. Alden.

“Her uncle in California—” he began; but Alice broke in:

“It happens in novels. Neely, you can buy the new machine.”

“Would you mind saying what has happened?” Neely asked, patiently.

The minister told him, and added: “I’m ashamed to say I’d forgotten the old fellow’s existence! So nobody can accuse me of waiting for dead men’s shoes.”

“Why should he have thought of me?” Alice pondered.

“He puts it rather queerly,” her father said, and quoted the remark about the Confucians.

Neely whistled. “You’d never have got

it, Alice, if you'd gone to China," he said. His voice was almost awed with astonishment.

"You can buy the large engine," Alice said.

Neely slapped his thigh with excitement. "Of course I won't—with your money! But, by Jove!" he said; then looked at her father. "You won't say 'no,' now? My balance to-day is nineteen hundred and seventy-five, sir. You'll let me have her right off?"

"Oh, you'll get that engine," William Alden said, chuckling; "I never saw such barefaced desire to marry a girl for her money. She probably won't get it for some months—perhaps not for a year. Oh yes; she can get married, if you're willin'."

"She must put it into government bonds," Neely said. "No, Alice, of course the quarry won't buy engines out of your money!"

"Well, I hope you'll let her use some of it to furnish her house with," Mr. Alden said. "You'll have enough to go to house-

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keeping on, if Alice buys the furniture, without touching your nineteen hundred and seventy-five."

"We're not going to leave you, father," Alice said, softly.

William Alden looked disturbed. "I really wish you would," he said; then added, as if to explain: "Young married people ought to live by themselves. I'll say, 'Bless you, my children,' any time now."

Then they all sat down on the grass, on the edge of the quarry, and the two men talked and talked, and Alice looked off at the shimmer of young birch leaves and the soft gloom of hemlocks on Ascutney's flank, and Jim, pawing the grass by the roadside, wished somebody would give him an apple.

But it wasn't until the day and hour were fixed that old Jim's nose was turned toward home; and then he had a heavier load to carry, for Neely squeezed himself in between the dashboard and his future father-in-law's knees, and went back to West Meadows, to stay to supper and "decide things"!

There was really nothing much to decide, except how soon Cousin Mary could get up to West Meadows to help Alice with her sewing, and also to make Mr. Alden see that the whole story-book affair could not change Alice's duty to her father.

"If I couldn't leave you to go to China, how could I leave you just to get married?" Alice insisted. "Why, I *couldn't*," she said; "Cousin Mary will say so."

When Neely said good night she was very quiet. Up-stairs, in her own room, she knelt a long time by her open window, looking out into the May darkness. They were to be married in two weeks, and were to live here in the parsonage; for, though by and by they would be rich—according to Alice's standards—of course, as she had said, she could never leave her father. So everything was perfect. It dazed her somehow. It almost frightened her to be so happy. "I don't deserve to be," she said; "for I could have gone, and I didn't."

But, in spite of this aching self-knowledge, the days—the hurrying fourteen days!—

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were full of happiness. It was only at night, when she knelt down to say her prayers, that the pang came; though once it did stab her into a sort of cry to Neely: "I have never had to do anything hard in my life; I've—shirked. Yet see how happy I am! I feel as if I had stolen my happiness from God. I wouldn't be 'burned alive.'"

The pain in her eyes almost frightened him. "Her conscience is bothering her," he thought, uneasily. "I wish China was in the depths of the sea!" . . . "If I don't get her right off, something will happen!"

But the next week he got her.

CHAPTER VII

“**C**OUSIN MARY says she will take us in,” William Alden said. “I wrote her to know whether it would be convenient to have us.”

This was in October; there had been five months of that “stolen” happiness; five months during which the young husband grew more absorbed in his wife, who was happy, too; but not—“not so happy as I am,” Neely thought, soberly. She was certainly very quiet, and too absent-minded, for a bride; “preoccupied and uneasy,” her father described it to himself. “I was afraid she would reproach herself,” he thought; “yet, of course, this is the right and natural thing for her—to be married and settled down.”

“If she had a house of her own, she’d take more interest in things,” he told Neely. “I want you to go and live by yourselves.”

But Neely wouldn’t listen to that. “Her

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conscience would bother her more than ever if we did that," he said.

And now the time had come when Alice was to receive her little fortune, and they were all three going down to Boston to get it; for the lawyer in San Francisco, who had sent the will in the spring, had arranged for all the business of transferring the money to be put through in the office of a Massachusetts correspondent. And if Miss Alden—who had rented her house and was to start off on that long-desired trip to Europe—was not too much packed up, they meant to quarter themselves upon her unfailing hospitality.

Cousin Mary's answer to Mr. Alden's letter, limited to ten carefully counted words, reassured them as to room and convenience; so on Monday morning off they went. Even as they set foot on the cindery step of the little car on the branch road, the holiday spirit of the sparkling October day fell upon the two men.

"Let's go on a spree; let's make a week of it!" Alice's father said.

"I'm with you!" Neely agreed.

"This is the time of the Annual Meetings," said Mr. Alden. "Mary and I will go and hear the returned missionaries—while Alice is buying hoopskirts."

"I'm going to the meetings, too," Alice said, in her brief way; "but what shall I do with the money when the lawyer gives it to me? Leave it in my trunk? I hope Cousin Mary's girl is honest!"

"Better keep it in your stocking," her father advised her. "Why, Sam—you little goose!—he'll give you a check—"

"And you'll deposit it instanter," said Neely.

"Did you suppose you would receive it in one-dollar bills?" William Alden said.

"I suppose I did," Alice confessed; and her father and husband laughed so loudly that the conductor, collecting the tickets a dozen seats ahead, turned around and looked at them.

In Boston they went at once to Cousin Mary's house, where the leaves of the wis-

taria over the front door were yellowing in the autumnal sunshine.

“You *do* look packed up!” Mr. Alden said to their hostess as he steered his way among the trunks in the front hall. “When do you sail, Mary?”

“Next week,” she said, happily. “I had great luck in renting my house!”

William Alden sighed. “I’ll miss you,” he said. He was rather silent at dinner, which gave Neely the chance to ask just what sights he must take Alice to see, and try to get the maddening complexities of the various car routes into his head.

After dinner he and Alice started off to wander about the pleasant old city and see everything the guide-book told them was important, and turn up, finally, at a church that overlooked the Common, just in time for a late afternoon meeting.

But William Alden and Cousin Mary stayed at home and talked things over—Europe, and West Meadows, and the amazing good luck that had come to Alice. It was a sort of mutual-congratulation time.

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“Alice wants Neely to buy a lot of machinery for the quarry,” Mr. Alden said; “but Neely is for investing the whole amount in government bonds.”

“Of course he’s right,” said Miss Alden.

“I do wish,” the minister said, “they would set up their own Lares and Penates and not have me on their hands.”

“Nonsense!” said Cousin Mary.

When the young people came home their elders felt a little clouding of the joyous atmosphere of the morning. Alice answered her cousin’s questions about the missionary meeting listlessly, and Neely watched her with troubled eyes.

“Headache, Alice?” Miss Alden asked. “Go and lie down. We won’t have supper until half past six.”

Alice tried to smile, but admitted that she was tired. “Yes, I’ll lie down, thank you, Cousin Mary.”

They heard her go slowly up-stairs, and when her door closed her father turned to Neely. “Alice is upset about something?”

The young man nodded. “We went to

one of those confounded meetings this afternoon; and there was a man just home from China, and it—well, I suppose it sort of brought things back to Alice. She's been—reproaching herself again," he said, sighing.

"Very morbid in her!" Cousin Mary said.

"I wish she'd forget the 'heathen Chinese,'" William Alden said.

"You see," Cornelius explained to Miss Alden, "always, back in her mind, is the feeling that she gave up the work just for her own happiness. It—it sort of rankles, you know."

"She is the stuff that martyrs are made of," her father said; "she gets her conscience from her mother."

"Conscience that isn't hitched up with common sense is a mighty dangerous thing," Miss Alden said.

"I wish she'd hitch up to common sense as to living with me," the minister murmured. "I keep telling them," he said to Miss Alden, "that they ought to be by themselves, but they won't listen to me."

"You bet we won't!" Cornelius said,

good-naturedly. "Why, Alice wouldn't have a happy minute, and neither would I. You understand, don't you, Cousin Mary? So long as she is taking care of Mr. Alden, there's a kind of justification in her mind about—about China, you know."

"I could have a housekeeper—" Mr. Alden began.

"Of all uncomfortable things!" said Cousin Mary.

"Alice would never agree to it," Neely said. Mr. Alden sighed.

The next morning was to be very exciting; they were all four to go to the lawyer's office and Alice was to receive the legacy. But really the visit was very tame; there was some talk between Mr. Alden and Mr. Holmes; some questions about her uncle; some brief remarks about his death; a jest or two upon "rich women," and joking advice to Neely not to invest it all in wildcats. Then the great moment was over; and, accompanied by Mr. Holmes—who had good-naturedly offered to introduce Alice at his own bank so she might open an account

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—they all trooped out to the elevator and dropped swiftly down from the twelfth floor to the first, the check, in one of Mr. Holmes's envelops, clasped tightly in Alice's hand.

"I don't feel any richer," she said.

"If I took it away from you, you'd feel poorer," Miss Alden told her.

But Alice said no; just a piece of paper didn't make you feel richer. At the bank the "piece of paper" was exchanged for a little narrow book full of more pieces of paper, and Alice was instructed in the mysteries of drawing a check. After all this "high finance," as Neely called it, was attended to, they said good-by to the friendly lawyer, and then stood on the steps of the bank and looked at one another.

"Well!" said Mr. Alden.

"What next?" said Cousin Mary.

"To keep up the excitement, let's go to Park Street Church and hear some addresses. Alice, being the wealthy member of society, can put enough into the contribution-box for all of us."

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“Afterward, I’m going shopping with Cousin Mary,” said Alice; she was flushed with excitement and a curious sense of power; she could buy—anything! “I never in all my life,” she said, “had more than five dollars at one time to spend!”

But when, a little later, they all four were seated in the dusky vestry of Park Street Church, the excitement ebbed; after all, it was just “money in the bank.” Neely would have to “invest it,” as Mr. Holmes had said.

So, listening to the speeches and prayers, she fell back again into her own thoughts. When the long prayer came she was so abstracted that she forgot to rise, and afterward, though she held her half of the hymn-book with Neely, she did not seem to see the words; at any rate, she didn’t sing. In the afternoon, when she and Cousin Mary went shopping, she didn’t hear Miss Alden’s ponderings as to the comparative lasting quality of huckaback and damask for towels.

“Would you rather have them fringed or hemstitched?” said Cousin Mary.

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“There’s a meeting at four,” Alice said.

“Alice! Come out of the clouds! We must decide about these towels.”

“Neely will meet me at the church,” Alice said, absently.

Neely had agreed to be on hand at this four-o’clock meeting, rather against his wish; for, as he had confided to Miss Alden, “any more missionary talk will just tear her all up again!” This particular talk even tore Cornelius a little.

A young woman—a saint!—white-haired, old-eyed, told of her work in the African jungle. . . . It was a story so terrible and so simple, so hideous and of such exalted beauty, that the men and women who listened did not know that the tears were falling down their cheeks. Even Neely’s eyes blurred once, and he said, under his breath, “Gosh!”. . . But Alice’s eyes were dry. Alice was unmoved. Alice—safe at home in America! Comfortable! Married! Rich!

Cornelius, looking at her, was startled at the whiteness of her face. “Alice! Are you faint, dear?” he whispered.

“No.” She motioned with her hand that he should be silent. “Listen,” she said.

One could not help listening when the speaker said, with sudden tenderness:

“Oh, I am so sorry for you! You saved, safe, happy people, who want to help, but who have to stay here at home and do the immediate duties of men and women, of husbands and wives, of children and parents! You have to do these duties instead of coming over to Africa. I know you do. I am not reproaching you for being here instead of there, for, oh! I know you wish you could be there! But you cannot be. So, let me, dear people, dear, *dear* people, let me *be* you! Let me be your hands and feet, let me be your heart! Let my lips speak your tenderness, my life show your self-sacrifice, your courage. Let me go into the jungle, so that you may go, too. Let me tell those who sit in darkness of a great light. Yes—yes! it will be you who will tell them. For your spirit drives me into the wilderness!” She paused; in her white face, under the white hair, her eyes

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were like torches, her whole face seemed to listen—listen: “I hear”—she put her cupped hand to her ear:—“I hear *you*, speaking in the Shadow of Death, words of Eternal Life!”

Alice was leaning forward, one hand on the back of the pew in front of her, the other gripping Neely’s arm. Suddenly she began to fumble with the catch of her pocketbook; but when she opened it, Neely saw there were only some silver pieces and a one-dollar bill.

“It’s all I have,” she said, under her breath. He smiled, and the tap on his breast pocket reminded her. “Oh!” she whispered. “Why, I forgot! Can I—*can* I give—five dollars?” Then she made a helpless gesture, as if to say, “but what is five dollars? Nothing!” The tears stood in her eyes. “I’d like to give five dollars,” she began—then stopped, for some one else had begun to speak. . . .

The statistics that the next speaker offered were necessary enough, no doubt, Neely thought, but they were uninteresting. So much money would support one mission-

ary for one year, so much would create a permanent foundation. These big figures would probably interest rich people, Neely thought, but "as far as we're concerned they might as well be a million." . . . How funny Alice was about her money! Apparently she didn't take it in that she was rich. She wondered whether she "could" give five dollars! "She could give fifty and not know it," he thought, comfortably. It occurred to him that it might be a sort of salve to her poor aching conscience to give fifty dollars. "I'll suggest it to her," he thought; and when the statistical speaker sat down, having pleaded for a "foundation," he leaned over and said, lavishly, "Why don't you give a hundred dollars, Alice?" He meant to say fifty dollars, but somehow the "hundred" slipped out.

"I'd like to," she said; and added, suddenly, between set teeth, "Every cent I have in the world; every cent!"

Neely, startled at the smothered violence of her voice, looked at her—and as he did so a thought leaped into his mind. . . .



A cross the Common lights pricked out of the shadows. A little vagrant dog came and leaned his head on Alice's knee. She stroked his ears absently.



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When the meeting was over they were both, as they walked up the hill, rather silent. As they paused to look at the great bronze memorial opposite the State House, Neely said, abruptly: "Hold on; I want to talk. Let's go and sit down on one of those benches on the Common."

They found a bench under an elm, and sat there in the deepening violet of the October dusk; but, in spite of his wish to talk, Neely at first seemed to have nothing to say, and Alice was listless again. Across the Common lights pricked out of the shadows; in front of them, on the path, people went to and fro. A little vagrant dog came and leaned his head on Alice's knee. She stroked his ears absently.

"How much did that statistical man say it would take to keep a missionary going for a year?" Neely asked, suddenly.

Alice told him. Apparently his question gave speech to some inarticulate pain, for she broke out, half sobbing:

"I keep thinking—"

"I know you do," he said.

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He took her hand and patted it anxiously; he knew only too well what she "kept thinking." "Alice, you know I wouldn't lie to you?" he said; "you know that, dear? So listen when I say: '*You did right not to go.*'" (Oh, how many, many times he had told her that!) "You had to stay at home."

"No. Down deep, I know I didn't have to. Cousin Mary would have taken care of father, if I—if I had stood firm. But . . . I didn't. I didn't want to go. . . . I was glad—*glad* of an excuse to stay! It is like a debt I haven't paid."

"Alice, wasn't there a debt of duty to your father?"

"Oh, I can't make you understand," she said, despairingly; "and you are the only person in the world I want to have understand." Her hand on the dog's head trembled. "Oh," she said, "if I could only pay—"

"I've been thinking that, myself," he said.

"If I could give some money,—it would be—something."

"You can, dear, of course. That's what I

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meant when I said give a hundred dollars. But, Alice, you can give more than that—if you'd be happier."

"Oh, Neely!"

"You can give all you want to," he told her, gently. ("I'd rather," he was saying to himself, "pay all I'm worth—pay 'every cent I have in the world'—than have her eyes so—so like that dog's." He could not bear the pain in her eyes!) "Alice," he said, slowly, "it occurred to me, when that man was speaking, that if you sent out a missionary for a year, you would be happier."

She nodded, clasping her hands to her breast in speechless assent.

Neely pulled the puppy's ears and sighed. ("The only thing is," he was thinking, "it will probably flare up again—all this remorse—in a year.) . . . Shall we give our balance, Alice? Every cent of it wouldn't be too much if it made you happy. If you were just—satisfied! I've never really had you, you know."

"No," she agreed, "I know you haven't. But"—she looked at him with dilating

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eyes, her hands still gripped together on her breast—"if you could—buy me, Neely?"

"I will," he said, soberly. "Alice, you know just what our balance is. Take any of it—take all of it!—and give me back all your mind. I know I have your heart, honey; but I want all your mind. All your little thoughts! I want you to be at peace."

For a minute Alice could not speak, her lips trembled so; then she said, "All?"

He smiled and nodded. She caught his hand in both of hers and kissed it. "Don't, dear! Don't!" he said, pulling it away. There were tears on her face, and his own eyes stung.

The little dog suddenly stood on his hind legs and licked Alice's cheek. Neely patted him. "Nice little chap," he said, huskily. A minute later, when they got up silently, to walk home, the puppy followed, unrebuked.

("But how long will just the balance keep her happy?" Neely asked himself, and sighed.)

CHAPTER VIII

WILLIAM ALDEN and Cousin Mary had skipped that last meeting and were back again in Cousin Mary's sitting-room, where the afternoon sunshine filtered through the row of geraniums in the south window. "I couldn't stand three conferences; I'd get spiritual indigestion from so much talkee-talkee," said the minister.

"I don't get indigestion, exactly," said Cousin Mary; "only, there's nothing I can do about the salvation of the world—until I die. Then I can leave 'em something in my will. But meantime it just makes me unhappy; so why should I go and hear how much (what I haven't got to give!) is needed?"

"What I particularly admire about you, Mary, is your common sense."

"That shows how old you are getting,

William," she retorted; "only age admires common sense!"

"Oh yes; I'm old," he admitted. They both laughed. "Mary," he said, meditatively, "I'm not only old, I'm selfish. I could find it in my heart to wish that you were not going to Europe."

"Think I'm too young and lovely to travel alone?" said Miss Alden.

"I'm talking seriously—and selfishly. If you weren't going, I really think I'd be fool enough to—to make a suggestion."

"What's your suggestion?"

"The children—if I wasn't a millstone around their necks!—could have their own home, now that Alice has this little fortune."

"Is that your suggestion? . . . They won't leave you."

"No, they won't. Alice's sense of duty—I don't enjoy being a sense of duty, Mary;—keeps them with me."

She admitted that feeling you were a "duty" wasn't pleasant. "But there's nothing you can do about it, that I can see," she said.

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“If you weren’t going to Europe, there might be something.”

She looked puzzled. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“I mean, if I didn’t ‘set *your* teeth on edge,’ I might—well, cease to be a sense of duty—to Alice.”

“What!”

“Oh, of course, I’m not suggesting it, exactly. Only—”

Her blank astonishment brought the color into his face. He drew his chair up to hers and laid a cousinly hand on her arm. “Look here,” he began; “I’ve been thinking of it ever since Alice had this money left to her. I am not suggesting it, remember; but it would be—for *me*, of course — just common sense. Common sense, and—and affection. I suppose you’d laugh to have a man of nearly sixty say he was in love. So I won’t say it. But I haven’t forgotten what happened twenty-nine years ago, though you probably have. And you could say ‘darn it’ all you wanted to,” he ended, wistfully.

She was silent. Then, slowly: "William, once bitten, twice shy. I was brazen enough once to suggest some such arrangement to you, and as things turned out—"

"Well, they couldn't turn out that way again. Alice is married; it would only set her free. As far as affording to live by themselves goes, her money will make it perfectly possible."

She laughed, and said, "Well—" then broke off: "Hush! Here they come. . . . A good meeting, young people? Did you hear Miss Heath? Heavens!—what is this? A dog?"

"He followed us," Neely said. "Miss Heath is wonderful!" The elation in his voice and face was in striking contrast to the depression of the night before. As for Alice, she looked like one in a dream. She said, vaguely, something about Miss Heath, and would Cousin Mary please let the puppy stay in the back yard? Then she looked at her husband and tried to speak. "Neely is—good," she said; her voice shook with the passion of her praise—"good." Then she

slipped out of the room. Again the three people who loved her looked at one another; but this time only the two elders were puzzled. Neely was radiant.

“I don’t think Alice will ever be morbid again, sir, about missionaries,” he told Mr. Alden.

“I wish I hadn’t suggested that she should go to these meetings,” the minister said.

“We have a plan,” Neely said; “but I mustn’t tell you. It’s her affair.”

“Good gracious, Neely!” Cousin Mary broke in; “that child hasn’t any bee in her bonnet about going off missionarying? William, we ought not to have let her hear that Heath woman!”

But Cornelius made haste to reassure her. “No; no! That’s all over with. She’ll get square with her conscience—in her own way. And then she’ll be perfectly happy.”

That was all they could get out of him. “May I take this animal down to the kitchen, Cousin Mary, and give him some supper?” he said; and, picking up the puppy, he vanished.

“Well!” said William Alden, turning impatiently to his cousin,—he was too absorbed in his own affairs to pay much attention to his son-in-law. He waited until he heard the young man going up-stairs, then began again, just where he had been interrupted: “They will have money enough now; so, if it wasn’t for Europe, I—I would have got my courage up to ask you before this, if— I wouldn’t interfere with your plans for the world. But perhaps when you come back—”

Miss Alden shook her head. “Oh, I had an idea of settling down over there for two or three years.”

“I knew you’d feel that way,” he said, despondently.

“I haven’t said how I feel,” she murmured. (“If that dog scares my cat, I’ll shake Neely!) It would be too foolish for people of our age to be engaged,” she said.

He gave a gasp of hope. “We needn’t be engaged; we can just be married—to-morrow.” He took her hand in his and squeezed

it hard. "But no! You are going to Europe."

"Well, I'm not there yet! Don't squeeze my hand so. You hurt me. And—and perhaps the boat won't sail."

"It would set Alice and Neely free!"

"You seem terribly anxious about the children," she evaded.

At which he put a sudden arm round her.

"Hang the children!"

"William! That's as bad as 'darn it!' and you know that was why I said 'no' in the first place."

"I want you to marry me on my own account! If you can give up Europe—"

.
That night the house on the hill, with the front hall full of trunks, and the rugs rolled up, and the curtains taken down, was divided into two friendly but uncommunicative and very taciturn camps. Neely sat at Miss Alden's desk, studying a handful of missionary reports and putting down figures. Alice amused herself with the puppy. Mr. Alden and Cousin Mary played back-

gammon. When they all said good night to one another, Cousin Mary looked at Mr. Alden and said, "But what *shall* I do with all this furniture?"—a remark which had no meaning to Neely and Alice. And Neely, thrusting a sheaf of reports into his pocket, said: "They'd have to get five per cent. to do it;"—a remark which had no meaning to Cousin Mary and Mr. Alden.

The next day—a yellow October day of haze, deepening into a gentle rain—was very busy for them all.

"We'll surprise 'em!" Mr. Alden told Cousin Mary; and spent a busy morning between the mayor's office and a jewelry-store.

"I'm afraid I'll surprise the steamship office," she said, drolly. "I'll go down there this morning and see what they can do for me. William, I do hope we are not a couple of old fools?"

"We are a couple of very sensible people," he reassured her—and hurried out into the rain. She ran to the front door and called after him:

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“Do you think it’s sensible not to take an umbrella? William, you *do* need looking after!”

Neely and Alice were sensible enough to remember an umbrella, and Neely also remembered to feed his dog. “I’ll crate him and send him back to West Meadows tomorrow,” he said.

Then he and Alice started off. “We are going to the morning conference,” Neely vouchsafed to the other two.

“Those children have conferences on the brain,” said Mr. Alden, uneasily. But Neely had no uneasiness.

“Dear,” he said to his wife, when they were once clear of Cousin Mary’s front door, “I have thought of something.” Then he said, softly, in her ear, just three words: “*Give your money.*”

She stood stock still in the rain and stared at him.

“The balance would only keep you contented as long as it lasted. Your money would last always! It would be for a foundation,” he explained.

“Oh,” she said, faintly; “you don’t—you can’t—love me like—like *that?*”

“I do! More. Fifty thousand times more! What is money, anyhow, compared to your happiness?” Then, as they began to climb the hill, he told her in detail what a “foundation” would mean. “I have thought it all out,” he ended; “I stayed awake ’most all night, thinking it out. There can always be an ‘Alice’ missionary, if you want to have her.”

“It would be the same as if *I* had gone? For all my life?”

“Just the same. Better, if anything, because you see it would go on always; which is more than you could have done. And”—he gave her a droll look—“and really I don’t think you were cut out for a missionary, darling.”

Alice’s face was rigid.

“Neely, I can’t bear it! I am not worth it. To be loved—like that!” Again she stood still, clutching at his arm, and he saw that she was trembling very much. “Oh, if I *could* give it! If I could!”

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“You can. It’s yours.”

“But the quarry?”

“I can swing the quarry. And we have the balance. And we won’t be a bit poorer than we were yesterday morning. And as long as Mr. Alden needs us, we have a house, too. That sounds as if I counted on living on my father-in-law,” he said, chuckling; “but you understand.”

“Oh, my Neely! My Neely!”

“I think,” said Cornelius, “that we won’t tell any one. Your father might not understand.”

“He couldn’t. Nobody could—but you.”

They had reached the top of the hill by this time, and Alice stopped. “May I make the check out here?” she said.

“Here? In the rain?”

She nodded. They were in front of the great bronze memorial, shining and dripping in the rain, and, pausing, Alice took out her little long, thin book, full of “pieces of paper,” then, with Neely’s fountain pen, wrote her first and last check. “Oh,” she said, handing the pen back to him, “to

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think you are willing to pay *that*—for such a poor little thing as I am!”

“Honey,” said Neely, putting the pen back in his pocket, “peace of mind is cheap at ten thousand dollars!” As they walked down to the church he gave her a note which he said she must pin to her check, stating that it was an endowment for a permanent fund, and that the donor wished to be anonymous. “Would you like,” he said, gently, “to call it by your mother’s name, ‘Ellen’?”

In a whisper Alice said, “Never, never in the world was there anybody who ever lived, like you, Neely. . . .”

They were so early that there was only a handful of people scattered about the church; they sat down very close together, in a pew from which Alice could look through the streaming window-panes at the old burial-ground; now and then a yellow linden leaf drifted down, falling sometimes on one of the gray headstones, sometimes on the bleached grass over the sunken graves. After a while Neely saw her take the check-

book out of her little bag and pin his explanatory note to her check; then she looked at him, and worshiped!

She held the book in her hand all through the service, and at the long prayer, when she bowed her forehead on the back of the next seat, he thought, looking at her out of the corner of his eye, that she took the check—rain-spattered from that pause before the Shaw Memorial—and held it to her lips. When the prayer ended she fumbled for his hand and pressed the check into his fingers. “*You* put it into the collection-box.”

“No,” he whispered back; “it’s yours, dear.”

But she shook her head. “*You* are paying,” she said.

He was deeply happy; safe in his hand, waiting for the contribution-box, which, on the end of a long pole, was coming down the aisle, raking each pew on its way, was the price of peace. As it reached them he heard Alice catch her breath, saw her bite her lip and lean forward; her eyes were

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stern with joy. He looked at her, smiled, lifted his eyebrows in one last question: "Sure you want to?" And as she nodded, passionately, he dropped the check into the box. Then he took her hand in his, and held it quietly. "She's mine now," he said to himself. His eyes were triumphant.

"I am happy," she said, under her breath.

CHAPTER IX

“YOU tell 'em, William!” said Cousin Mary.

“No, *you* tell them,” said the minister.

They were standing up in the dismantled sitting-room, smiling and conscious, and enormously pleased with themselves.

“Well, young people,” Cousin Mary began; “you can set up shop by yourselves.”

“Alice,” William Alden said, “you and Neely can go out to the shack. Cousin Mary and I are married, and—”

“*Married!*”

“Married?”

“But she’s going to Europe!” Alice gasped.

“So you needn’t have me on your consciences,” said William Alden.

“Oh—” said Alice.

Just for a minute Neely was pale.

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“So, you see, you can go to housekeeping by yourselves,” said Cousin Mary.

“But we can’t,” said Alice, faintly.

“We will!” Neely said; then he threw up his hands and doubled over with laughter. “O Lord!” he said. “I’m glad I didn’t know it this morning!”

“Know what?” said Cousin Mary.

“That we could go off and live in the shack. It might”—said Neely, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes—“it might have taken my mind off the service. But I’m perfectly delighted,” he said. Alice said nothing until he pinched her and whispered: “Dummy! It’s all right. Look pleased!” At which she smiled and kissed the bride and said she was “delighted.”

“The steamship people took over my tickets,” said Miss Alden (no—Mrs. Alden!), “and I sold my steamer rug; I consider I got a bargain! Now all I have to do is to arrange to send the furniture I was going to store, up to West Meadows; for we’ll need it at the parsonage when you take your things away, Alice. I should think you’d

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add a little ell to the shack? You have money enough.”

“I’ve spent more money than I had any business to on books,” said Mr. Alden; “but I got one or two bargains myself. This thing of having money come into the family seems to have made me reckless. Cousin Mary and I are going back to West Meadows to-morrow, young people. But I suppose you two rich folks will continue to blow in your fortune down here for a day or two?”

“We’ve blown in all we want to, thank you,” said Cornelius; “so we’ll go home, too—but we got something of a bargain ourselves!”

THE END

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